WRITINGS FROM AN UNBOUND EUROPE

HOUSE OF DAY, HOUSE OF NIGHT

OLGA TOKARCZUK

Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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Translator's note

The book is set in south-west Poland, in the region known as Silesia. This was part of the German Reich until 1945, when at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences the Allies agreed to move the borders of Poland westwards. Many Polish citizens were transported from the land lost to the east (annexed by the USSR) and resettled in formerly German territory to the west, where they were given the homes and property of evacuated Germans.

Readers are advised that some of the recipes in this book should carry the health warning, 'Don't try this at home!'

Your house is your larger body.
It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night;
and it is not dreamless.
Does not your house dream? And dreaming, leave the
city for grove or hilltop?

GIBRAN

The dream

The first night I had a dream. I dreamed I was pure sight, without a body or a name. I was suspended high above a valley at some undefined point from which I could see everything. I could move around my field of vision, yet remain in the same place. It seemed as if the world below was yielding to me as I looked at it, constantly moving towards me, and then away, so first I could see everything, then only tiny details.

I could see a valley with a house standing in the middle of it, but it wasn't my house, or my valley, because nothing belonged to me. I didn't even belong to myself. There was no such thing as 'I'. Yet I could see the circular line of the horizon enclosing the valley on all sides. I could see a turbulent stream flowing down between the hills. I could see trees set deep into the ground like huge, one-legged creatures. The stillness of what I could see was only on the surface. Whenever I wished, I could look through this surface to what lay underneath. Under the bark of trees I could see rivulets of water, streams of sap flowing up and down the trunk. Under the roof of the house I could see the bodies of people asleep, and their stillness, too, was only superficial – their hearts were beating gently, their blood was rippling in their veins, I could even see their dreams, fragments of images flashing inside their heads. In their tangled dream-thoughts I could see myself (this was when I discovered the strange truth, that I was purely vision, without any values or emotions). Then I discovered that I could see through time as well, and that just

as I could change my point of view in space, so I could change it in time, too. I was like the cursor on a computer screen navigating of its own accord, or at least oblivious of the hand that is moving it.

I seemed to dream like this for an eternity. There was no before, or after, no sense of anticipation, because there was nothing to gain or lose. The night would never end. Nothing would happen. Even time would never change what I could see. I went on staring, not noticing anything new or forgetting anything I had seen.

Marta

When we moved in three years ago, we spent the whole of the first day inspecting our property. Our gumboots kept sinking into the reddish mud. It stained our hands, and when we washed them the water ran red. R. examined the trees in the orchard again. They were old, bushy and rambling in all directions. Trees like that won't bear much fruit. The orchard stretched down to the forest, stopping at a dark wall of spruces, standing there like soldiers. In the afternoon the sleet began to fall again. Water collected in pools on the clay-clogged earth, creating streamlets and rills that flowed straight down to the house, seeping into the walls and disappearing somewhere under the foundations. Worried by the constant trickling sound, we went down into the cellar with a candle. Water was pouring down the stone steps, washing over the stone floor and flowing out again into the pond. We realized that the house had been unwisely built on an underground river, and it was too late to do anything about it. The only option was to get used to the relentless murmur of water disturbing our dreams.

There was a second river outside – a stream full of mud-red water that blindly washed away at the roots of the trees before vanishing into the forest.

From the window of the main room we can see Marta's house. Ever since I've know her, I have wondered who Marta really is. She's always giving me a different version of the facts about herself – even the year of her birth changes. For me and R. Marta only ever exists in the summer; in winter she disappears, like everything else around here. She is small, her hair is white as snow, and some of her teeth are missing. Her skin is wrinkled, dry and warm. I know this, because we have sometimes greeted each other with a kiss or an awkward hug, and I have caught her smell – of damp forced to dry out quickly. This smell lingers for ever, it can't be got rid of. Clothing that has got wet in the rain should be washed, my mother used to say, but then she was always doing a lot of unnecessary laundry. She used to take clean, starched sheets out of the wardrobe and throw them in the washing-machine, as if not using them made them just as dirty as using them. The smell of damp is usually unpleasant, but on Marta's clothes and skin it smells nice and familiar. If Marta's around, everything's in its place and in perfect order.

She came by on our second evening. First we drank tea, then last year's rosehip wine, thick and dark, so sweet it makes you feel dizzy at the first gulp. I was unpacking books. Marta held her glass in both hands and watched without curiosity. It occurred to me at the time that perhaps she didn't know how to read. It was possible, as she was old enough to have missed out on state education. I have noticed since that letters simply don't hold her attention, but I have never asked her about it.

The dogs were excited and kept coming in and out of the house, bringing the scent of winter and wind on their fur. As soon as they had warmed up in front of the kitchen fire, they felt

the lure of the garden again. Marta stroked their backs with her long, bony fingers, telling them how beautiful they were. She spoke only to the dogs all evening. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I arranged the books on wooden shelves. A lamp lit up the crown of her head, from which fell a tuft of thin white hair, tied at the nape of her neck into a little pigtail.

I have such a lot of memories, but I can't remember the first time I saw Marta. I remember all my first encounters with the people who have subsequently become important to me: I can remember whether the sun was shining and what they were wearing (R.'s funny East German boots, for instance), I can remember how things smelled and tasted, and what the air was like – whether it was crisp and sharp, or cool and smooth as butter. That's what first impressions are made of – these things get recorded somewhere in a detached, primitive part of the brain and can never be forgotten. But even so, I can't remember my first encounter with Marta.

It must have been early spring – that's when everything starts here. It must have been in this rugged part of the valley, because Marta never goes further afield on her own. There must have been a smell of water and melted snow, and she must have been wearing that grey cardigan with the loose buttonholes.

I've never known much about Marta, only what she has told me herself. I have had to guess most of it, and I've been aware of fantasizing about her, of inventing for her an entire past and present. Whenever I've asked her to tell me something about herself, about when she was young, how something that appears obvious now looked then, she has changed the subject, turned to face the window or simply fallen silent and concentrated on chopping up a cabbage or plaiting the hair that she uses to make wigs. It's not as if she has seemed reluctant to talk, but just as if she simply has nothing to say about herself, as if she has no

history. She only likes to talk about other people – some I might have seen once or twice by chance, others I may never have seen at all, and never could, because they lived too long ago. She also likes to talk about people who never actually existed – I have since found proof that Marta likes to invent things – and about the places where she has chosen to plant these people. I've known her to talk for hours, until I've had enough and find an excuse to interrupt her politely and go home across the green. Sometimes she breaks off these narratives of hers suddenly, for no reason, and doesn't return to the subject for weeks, until one day out of the blue she says: 'You remember how I was telling you . . .' 'Yes, I remember.' 'Well, what happened next was . . .' and she carries on with some tired old story, while I'm racking my brains to remember who she's talking about and where she broke off. Oddly, it's never the actual story that comes back to me, but the memory of Marta telling it, a small figure, with her round shoulders in the cardigan with the loose buttonholes and her bony fingers. Did she tell this one while staring straight ahead as we were driving to Wambierzyce to order planks, or was it the time we were picking camomile in Bobol's field? I've never been able to reconstruct the story itself, but always remember exactly when and where it was first rooted within me, as if these stories are unreal somehow, nothing but fantasies that exist only within our two heads. Sometimes she breaks off in mid-story just as abruptly as she started; a fork falls to the floor with a metallic clang, shattering the last sentence, and the next word comes to a halt on her lips. Or our neighbour, Whatsisname, comes in without knocking, as he always does, stamping his great big boots on the doorstep and trailing water, dew, mud – whatever there is outside – behind him, and once he's around he makes so much noise that it's impossible to have any sort of conversation.

Many of the things Marta has told me have not stayed in my memory, but have just left a vague impression, like mustard on the edge of a plate after the food has been eaten. Odd scenes, funny or frightening, and odd images torn out of context have remained – children catching trout from a stream with their bare hands, for instance. I don't know why I have stored this kind of detail, while forgetting the rest of the story. It must have made some sort of sense – it was a story, after all, with a beginning and an end – but I remember nothing but the pips, which my memory – quite rightly – has had to spit out later on.

It's not that I do nothing but listen. Sometimes I talk to her, too. Once early on I told her I was afraid of dying, not of death in general, but of the actual moment when I would no longer be able to put anything off till later, and that this fear always comes over me when it's dark, never in the daytime, and goes on for several awful moments, like an epileptic fit. I immediately felt embarrassed at having made this rather abrupt confession. That time it was me who tried to change the subject.

Marta is not a therapist at heart. She doesn't keep asking questions, she won't suddenly abandon the washing up to sit down beside me and pat me on the back. She doesn't try, as others do, to work out the chronological order of important events by asking: 'When did it start?' Even Jesus couldn't have resisted asking the madman he was about to heal, 'So when did it start?' But in fact the most important thing is what's actually going on here and now, right before your eyes, and questions about the beginning and end tell you nothing worth knowing.

Sometimes I have thought Marta wasn't listening or that she lacked sensitivity, like a lifeless cut-down tree, because when I've told her something meaningful the kitchen utensils have not stopped clattering, nor have her movements lost any of their mechanical fluency. She has even seemed cruel somehow, not just

once or twice but often – like when she fattens up those chickens of hers, then kills and devours them in three days flat each autumn.

I have failed to understand Marta in the past, and I don't understand her now. But why should I? What would I get from uncovering her motives, or the sources of her tales? What would I gain from her life story, if indeed she has a life story to speak of? Maybe there are people with no life story, with no past or future, who are different, always in the present?

Whatsisname

For the past few evenings, just after the television news, our neighbour Whatsisname has come by. Each time R. has warmed up some wine, sprinkled it with cinnamon and thrown in some cloves, and each time Whatsisname has talked about the winter, because apparently the story of the winter has to be told before the summer can come. It's always the same story – of how Marek Marek hanged himself.

We've heard this story from other people too, but yesterday and the day before we heard it from Whatsisname. The second time he forgot he had told it already and started all over again from the beginning, which was a question – why weren't we at the funeral? We couldn't come, we said, because it was in January when we were away, and we simply couldn't get here. It was snowing and the cars wouldn't start, their batteries were flat. The road beyond Jedlina was snowed up and all the buses were stuck in wretched traffic jams.

Marek Marek lived in the cottage with the tin roof. Last autumn his mare kept coming into our orchard to eat the windfall apples. She would dig them out from under the rotting leaves, staring at us nonchalantly, ironically even, R. said.

One afternoon as darkness was starting to fall Whatsisname was on his way back from Nowa Ruda. He noticed that the door of Marek Marek's house was slightly ajar, just as it had been that morning, so he leaned his bike against a wall and looked in through the window. He saw him at once. He was half hanging, half lying by the door, twisted and undoubtedly dead. Whatsisname shaded his eyes with his hand to see better. Marek Marek's face was livid, his tongue was sticking out and his eyes were staring up into space. 'What a loser,' Whatsisname said to himself, 'he couldn't even hang himself properly.'

He took his bike and went home.

During the night he felt a bit uneasy. He wondered if Marek Marek's soul had gone to heaven or hell, or wherever a soul goes, if it goes anywhere at all.

He woke up with a start at the first light of dawn, and saw Marek Marek standing by the stove, staring at him. Whatsisname lost his nerve. 'Please, I beg you, go away. This is my house. You've got a house of your own.' The apparition didn't move; it kept staring straight at Whatsisname, but its weird gaze seemed to pass right through him.

'Marek Marek, please go away,' repeated Whatsisname, but Marek Marek, or whoever it was, didn't react. Then, overcoming his fear of making any kind of movement, Whatsisname got out of bed and picked up a gumboot. Thus armed, he walked towards the stove, and the apparition disappeared right before his eyes. He blinked and went back to bed.

In the morning on his way to fetch wood he looked through the window of Marek Marek's house again. Nothing had changed, the body was still lying in the same position, but today the face looked darker. Whatsisname spent the whole day carting wood down from the hills on the sledge he had made last summer. He brought down small birches that he had felled himself, and the

thick trunks of fallen spruces and beech trees. He stored them in the shed and got them ready to cut into smaller pieces. Then he whipped up the stove until the top plate was red hot. He made some potato soup for himself and his dogs, switched on the black-and-white television and watched the flickering pictures as he ate. Not a word of it sank in. As he was getting into bed he crossed himself for the first time in decades, since his confirmation, or maybe since his wedding. This long-forgotten gesture prompted the idea that he should go and ask the priest about something like this.

The next day he sheepishly hovered about outside the presbytery. Finally the priest came bowling along at high speed, sidestepping patches of melting snow on his way to the church. Whatsisname wasn't stupid, he didn't come straight out with it. 'What would you do, Father, if you were haunted by a ghost?' he asked. The priest gave him a look of surprise and then his gaze wandered up to the church roof, where some endless repairs were under way. 'I'd tell it to go away,' he said. 'And what if the ghost was stubborn and wouldn't go away, then what would you do?' 'You have to be firm in all things,' replied the priest thoughtfully, and nimbly slipped past Whatsisname.

That night everything happened the same as before. Whatsisname awoke suddenly, as if someone were calling him, sat up in bed and saw Marek Marek standing by the stove. 'Get out of here!' he shouted. The apparition didn't move, and Whatsisname even thought he could see an ironic smile on its dark, swollen face. 'To hell with you, why can't you let me sleep? Get lost!' said Whatsisname. He picked up the gumboot and moved towards the stove. 'Will you please get out of my house!' he screamed, and the ghost vanished.

On the third night the apparition didn't appear, and on the fourth day Marek Marek's sister found the body and raised the

alarm. The police arrived, wrapped Marek Marek up in black plastic and took him away. They questioned Whatsisname about where he had been and what he had been doing. He told them he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. He also told them that when someone drinks like Marek Marek did, sooner or later it'll end like that. They agreed with him and left.

Whatsisname took his bike and shambled off to Nowa Ruda. At the Lido restaurant he sat with a mug of beer in front of him and sipped it slowly. Of all his emotions, the strongest was relief.

Radio Nowa Ruda

The local radio station broadcasts twelve hours a day, mainly music. There's national news on the hour, and local news on the half hour. There's also a daily quiz, which almost always used to be won by the same person, a man called Wadera. He must have been immensely knowledgeable – he knew things that no one could have guessed. I promised myself that one day I'd find out who Mr Wadera was, where he lived and how he knew so much. I'd walk over the hills to Nowa Ruda to ask him something important, I don't know what. I imagined him casually picking up the phone each day and saying: 'Yes, I know the answer, it's *Canis lupus*, the largest member of the dog family,' or: 'The glaze used to coat ceramic tiles before firing is called "slip",' or: 'Pythagoras's teachers are thought to have been Pherecides, Hermodamas and Archemanes.' And so on, every day. The prizes are books from the local supplier. Mr Wadera must have quite a library.

One day, just before setting the question, I heard the announcer say hesitantly: 'Mr Wadera, would you please not call us today?'

Between twelve and one a pleasant woman's voice reads a serialized novel. It's impossible not to listen to it, we all have to listen to every single novel because it's on when we're preparing the dinner, when we're peeling potatoes or making meatballs. Throughout April it was *Anna Karenina*.

'"He loves another woman, that is clearer still," she said to herself as she entered her own room. "I want love, and it is lacking. So everything is finished! and it must be finished. But how?" she asked herself, and sat down in the armchair before the looking-glass.'

Sometimes Marta comes over at noon and automatically starts helping with something, such as dicing the carrots.

Marta listens quietly and solemnly, but she never says anything – about *Anna Karenina*, or any other novel read on the radio. I sometimes wonder if she can understand these stories made up of dialogue read out by a single voice, and think maybe she's only listening to individual words, to the melody of the language.

People of Marta's age suffer from senility and Alzheimer's. Once I was weeding the kitchen garden when R. called me from the other side of the house. I hadn't had time to answer.

'Is she there?' he asked Marta, who was standing where she could see both of us. She glanced at me and shouted in reply: 'No, she's not here.'

Then she calmly turned round and went home.

Marek Marek

There was something beautiful about that child – that's what everyone said. Marek Marek had white-blonde hair and the face of an angel. His older sisters adored him. They used to push him

along the mountain paths in an old German pram and play with him as if he were a doll. His mother didn't want to stop breast-feeding him; as he sucked at her, she dreamed of turning into pure milk for him and flowing out of herself through her own nipple – that would have been better than her entire future as Mrs Marek. But Marek Marek grew up and stopped seeking her breasts. Old Marek found them instead, though, and made her several more babies.

Despite being so lovely, little Marek Marek was a poor eater and cried at night. Maybe that was why his father didn't like him. Whenever he came home drunk he would start beating Marek Marek. If his mother came to his defence, his father would lay into her too, until they'd all escape upstairs, leaving old Marek the rest of the house to fill with his snoring. Marek's sisters felt sorry for their little brother, so they taught him to hide at an agreed signal and from the fifth year of his life Marek Marek sat out most of his evenings in the cellar. There he would cry silently, without any tears.

There he realized that his pain did not come from the outside, but from inside, and had nothing to do with his drunken father or his mother's breast. It hurt for no particular reason, the way the sun rises each morning and the stars come out each night. It just hurt. He didn't know what it was yet, but sometimes he had a vague memory of a sort of warm, hot light drowning and dissolving the entire world. Where it came from, he didn't know. All he could remember of his childhood was eternal twilight, a darkened sky, the world plunged into gloom, the chill and misery of evenings without beginning or end. He also remembered the day electricity was brought to the village. He thought the pylons that came marching over the hills from the neighbouring village were like the pillars of a vast church.

Marek Marek was the first and only person from his village to

subscribe to the district library in Nowa Ruda. Then he took to hiding from his father with a book, which gave him a lot of time for reading.

The library in Nowa Ruda was housed in the old brewery building and it still smelled of hops and beer; the walls, floors and ceilings all gave off the same pungent odour – even the pages of the books reeked as if beer had been poured over them. Marek Marek liked this smell. At fifteen he got drunk for the first time. It felt good. He completely forgot about the gloom, he could no longer see the difference between dark and light. His body went slack and wouldn't obey him. He liked that, too. It was as if he could come out of his body and live alongside himself, without thinking or feeling anything.

His older sisters got married and left home. One younger brother was killed by an unexploded bomb. The other was in a special school in Kłodzko, so old Marek just had Marek Marek left to beat – for not shutting in the hens, for not mowing the grass short enough, for breaking the pivot off the threshing machine. But when Marek Marek was about twenty he hit his father back for the first time and from then on they beat each other up on a regular basis. Meanwhile, whenever Marek Marek had a little time and no money for drink, he read Stachura, the beat poet. The library ladies bought the collected works especially for him, covered in blue fabric that looked like jeans.

Marek Marek was still as handsome as ever. He had fair, shoulder-length hair and a smooth, girlish face. And he had very pale eyes, faded even, as if they had lost their colour through straining for light in dark cellars, as if they were worn out from reading all those blue-covered volumes. But women were afraid of him. Once, during a disco, he went outside with one, dragged her into an elder bush and ripped off her blouse. It's a good thing she yelled, because some other boys ran out and punched

him. But she liked him; maybe he just didn't know how to talk to women. Another time he got drunk and knifed a guy who was friendly with a girl he knew, as if he had exclusive rights over her. Afterwards, at home, he cried.

He continued to drink, and he liked the way it felt when his legs made their own way across the hills while everything inside – and thus all the pain – stopped, as if a switch had been snapped off and darkness had suddenly fallen. He liked to sit in the Lido pub amid the din and smoke and then suddenly to find himself, God knows how, in a field of flowering flax and to lie there until morning. To die. Or to drink at the Jubilatka and then suddenly to be snaking his way along the highway towards the village with a bloody face and a broken tooth. To be only partly alive, only partly conscious, slowly and gently ceasing to be. To get up in the morning and feel his head aching – at least he knew what hurt. To feel a thirst, and to be able to quench it.

Finally Marek Marek caught up with his father. He gave the old man such a battering against a stone bench that he broke his ribs and knocked him out. When the police came they took Marek Marek away to sober up, then kept him in custody, where there was nothing to drink.

Between the waves of pain in his head, in his drowsy, hungover state Marek Marek remembered that once, at the very beginning, he had fallen; that once he had been high up, and now he was low down. He remembered the downward motion and the terror – worse than terror, there was no word for it. Marek Marek's stupid body mindlessly accepted his fear and began to tremble; his heart thumped fit to burst. But his body didn't know what it was taking upon itself – only an immortal soul could bear such fear. His body was choked by it, shrank into itself and struck against the walls of his tiny cell, foaming at the mouth.

'Damn you, Marek!' shouted the warders. They pinned him to the ground, tied him up and gave him an injection.

He ended up in the detox ward, where with other figures in faded pyjamas he shuffled along the wide hospital corridors and winding staircases. He stood obediently in line for his medicine and swallowed it down as if taking Communion. As he stared out of the window it occurred to him for the first time that his aim was to die as soon as possible, to free himself from this rotten country, from this red-grey earth, from this overheated hospital, from these washed-out pyjamas, from this drugged-up body. From then on he devoted every single thought to contriving a way to die.

One night he slashed his veins in the shower. The white skin on his forearm split open and Marek Marek's inside appeared. It was red and meaty like fresh beef. Before losing consciousness he felt surprised because, God knows why, he thought he saw a light in there.

Naturally he was locked up in isolation, a fuss was made and his stay in hospital was extended. He spent the whole winter there, and when he got back home he discovered that his parents had moved to their daughter's place in town and now he was alone. They had left him the horse, and he used it to bring down wood from the forest, which he chopped up and sold. He had money, so he could drink again.

Marek Marek had a bird inside him – that's how he felt. But this wretched bird of his was strange, immaterial, unnameable and no more birdlike than he was himself. He felt drawn to things he didn't understand and was afraid of: to questions with no answer; to people in whose presence he always felt uncomfortable. He felt the urge to kneel down and suddenly start praying in desperation, not to ask for anything in his prayers, but just to talk and talk and talk in the hope that someone might be listening.

He hated this creature inside himself because it did nothing but increase his pain. If it weren't there, he would have drunk away quietly, sitting in front of the house and gazing at the mountain that rose before it. Then he would have sobered up and cured his hangover with the hair of the dog, then got drunk again without thinking, without guilt or decisions. The hideous great bird must have had wings. Sometimes it beat them blindly inside his body, flapping at its leash, but he knew its legs were fettered, maybe even tied to something heavy, because it could never fly away. My God, he thought, though he didn't believe in God at all, why am I being tortured by this thing inside me? The creature was immune to alcohol; it always remained painfully conscious; it remembered everything Marek Marek had done and everything he had lost, squandered or neglected; everything that had passed him by. 'Fuck it,' he mumbled drunkenly to Whatsisname, 'why does it torment me like this, what's it doing inside me?' But Whatsisname was deaf and didn't understand a thing. 'You've stolen my new socks,' he said. 'They were drying on the line.'

The bird inside Marek Marek had restless wings, fettered legs and eyes filled with terror. Marek Marek assumed it was imprisoned inside him. Someone had incarcerated it in him, though he hadn't the faintest idea how that was possible. Sometimes, if he let his thoughts wander, he ran into those terrible eyes deep inside himself and heard a mournful, bestial lament. Then he would jump up and run blindly up the mountain, into the birch copses, along the forest paths. As he ran he looked up at the branches – which one would hold his weight? The bird went on screaming inside him, let me out, set me free, I don't belong to you, I'm from somewhere else. At first Marek Marek thought it was a pigeon, the kind his father used to breed. He hated pigeons with their round, empty little eyes, their relentless

mincing steps, their skittish flight, always changing direction. Whenever there was nothing left in the house to eat his father would make him crawl into the pigeon loft and extract the silly, docile birds. He passed them to his father one by one, holding them in both hands as his father deftly wrung their necks. He hated their way of dying, too. They died like things, like objects. He hated his father just as much.

But once, by the Frosts' pond, he had seen another kind of bird: it had hopped out at his feet and taken off heavily, rising above the bushes, soaring over the trees and the valley. It was large and black, with a red beak and long legs. It gave a piercing scream, and for a while the air went on rippling in its wake. So the bird inside him was a black stork, except that it had fettered red legs and lacerated wings. It screamed and fluttered. He would wake up at night hearing this scream inside himself, a horrible, hellish scream. He sat up in bed terrified. Clearly he wouldn't fall asleep again until morning. His pillow stank of damp and vomit. He got up to look for something to drink. Sometimes there were a few drops left at the bottom of yesterday's bottle, sometimes not. It was too early to go to the shop. It was too early to be alive, so he just walked from wall to wall, dying.

When he was sober he could feel the bird in every part of his body, just beneath the skin. Sometimes he even thought he was the bird, and then they suffered together. Every thought that touched on the past or the doubtful future was painful. This pain made it impossible for Marek Marek to think anything through; he had to blur and dispel his thoughts to stop them having any meaning. If he thought about himself, and what he used to be like, it hurt. If he thought about what he was like now, it hurt even more. If he thought about what he would be like in the future, and what would become of him, the pain was unbearable. If he thought about his house, at once he saw the

rotting beams that would come crashing down any day now. If he thought about the field, he remembered that he hadn't sown it. If he thought about his father, he remembered that he had beaten him up. If he thought about his sister, he remembered that he had stolen money from her. If he thought of his beloved mare, he remembered how after sobering up he had found her dead with her newborn foal.

But when he drank, it was better. Not because the bird drank with him. No, the bird never got drunk, it never slept. But Marek Marek's drunken body and drunken thoughts took no notice of the bird's struggles. So he had to drink.

Once he tried to make himself some wine. Angrily he tore up the blackcurrant bushes – the garden was full of them – and with trembling hands threw them into a demijohn. He sacrificed some of his cash and bought sugar, then set up his concoction in the warmth of the attic. He was glad he would have his own wine, and that whenever he started to feel thirsty he'd be able to go up there, stick in a tube and drink straight from the demijohn. But without even realizing, he'd drunk it all up before it had fermented properly. He even chewed over the must. He had long since sold the television and the radio and the tape recorder. In any case he couldn't listen to anything – he always had the flutter of wings in his ears. He sold the wardrobe with the mirror, the rug, the harrows, his bicycle, his suit, the refrigerator, the icons of Christ wearing his crown of thorns and the Virgin Mary with the heart on the outside, the watering-can, the wheelbarrow, the sheaf-binder, the hay-tedder, the cart with rubber wheels, the plates, the pots and the hay – he even found a buyer for the manure. Then he went wandering about the ruins of the houses that had been abandoned by the Germans and discovered some stone troughs hidden in the grass. He sold them to a man who transported them to Germany. He would

gladly have sold his tumbledown house to the devil, but he couldn't – it still belonged to his father. His best days were when by some miracle he had managed to save a little alcohol until morning, so that as soon as he woke up he could take a slug without even getting out of bed. It made him feel blissful, and he would try not to fall asleep and lose that state of mind. He would get up dizzily and sit on a bench in front of the house. Sooner or later Whatsisname always came by on his way to Nowa Ruda, pushing his bike. 'You stupid old tramp,' Marek Marek would say, raising a shaky hand in greeting. Whatsisname would bestow a toothless grin on him. The socks had been found. The wind had caught them and blown them into the grass.

In November Whatsisname brought him a black puppy. 'There you go,' he said, 'no need for you to go on grieving for your mare, though she was a fine horse.' At first Marek Marek took the dog into the house, but it drove him mad by pissing on the floor. So he set up an old bathtub outside the house, turned it upside down and propped it up on two stones. He hammered a hook into the ground and tied the puppy to it by a chain. This was his ingenious makeshift kennel. To begin with the dog kept whining and howling, but eventually it got used to it. It wagged its tail at Marek Marek whenever he brought it some food. With the dog around he felt better somehow, and the bird inside him calmed down a bit. But then in December the snow fell and one night there was such a bad frost that the dog froze to death. He found it in the morning buried in snow. It looked like a bundle of rags. Marek Marek shoved it with his foot – it was completely stiff.

His sister invited him for Christmas Eve, but he quarrelled with her immediately because she refused to serve vodka with the dinner. 'What sort of a Christmas Eve is it, for fuck's sake, without vodka?' he said to his brother-in-law. He put his coat back on and went out. People were already on their way to midnight

mass to make sure they got good seats. He hung about near the church, staring at the familiar faces in the darkness. He bumped into Whatsisname – even he was stumbling his way across the snow to the village. 'What a winter, eh?' he said, smiling broadly and clapping Marek Marek on the shoulder. 'Get lost, you silly old fool,' replied Marek Marek. 'Yes, yes, quite,' said Whatsisname, nodding, and went into the church. People kept walking past Marek Marek, bowing to him coldly. In the vestibule they shook the snow off their shoes and went on inside. He lit a cigarette and heard the fluttering of tattered wings. Finally the bells began to ring, the congregation fell silent and the priest's voice rang out, distorted by a microphone. In the vestibule Marek Marek let the tips of his fingers skim the cold surface of the holy water, but he didn't cross himself. After a while the smell of steaming furs and festive overcoats dragged out from God knows where made him feel sick. Then he had an idea. He pushed his way back through the vestibule and went outside. The snow was falling hard, as if trying to cover up all the tracks. Marek Marek headed for the shop. On the way he stopped off at his sister's shed and took a pickaxe. He used it to break down the shop door, then stuffed his pockets with bottles of vodka, shoving them under his arms and down his trousers. He felt like laughing. 'They'll never bloody well catch me,' he said to himself and spent the whole night pouring vodka into the water tank by the stove. He threw the bottles into the well.

It was the best holiday of his life. As soon as he felt the slightest bit sober he knelt down by the tank, turned the tap, opened his mouth and vodka poured down his throat straight from heaven.

Just after the holiday the thaw began; the snow turned into nasty rain and the world looked like a sodden grey mushroom. The vodka was finished, too. Marek Marek didn't get

out of bed. He felt cold and ached all over. He kept trying to think where he might find something to drink. He got it into his head that old Marta might have some wine. Her house was empty because she always went away for the winter. In his mind's eye he could see her kitchen with bottles of home-made wine standing under the table, although in fact he knew that old Marta never made any wine. But maybe this year she had, maybe she'd made some blackcurrant or plum wine and hidden it under the table. To hell with her, he thought, and tumbled out of bed. He walked shakily, because he hadn't eaten for several days and his head hurt, as if it was going to explode.

The door was locked. He kicked it open. The hinges gave a nasty creak. Marek Marek felt sick. The kitchen looked as if old Marta had only left the day before. The table was covered with a checked oilcloth that reached to the floor. On it lay a large bread knife. Marek Marek quickly peered under the table and saw to his surprise that there was nothing there. He began rummaging in the cupboards. He looked in the stove, in the wood basket, and in the chest of drawers where the bed-linen lay neatly piled. Everything smelled of winter damp – of snow, wet wood and metal. He looked everywhere, feeling the mattress and eider-down, even thrusting his hand into some old gumboots. He had a clear vision of Marta in the autumn, before she left, packing away bottles of home-made wine. But he didn't know where. 'Stupid old bitch,' he said and burst into tears. He sat at the table with his head in his hands, and his tears fell on the oil-cloth, washing away some mouse droppings. He stared at the knife. When he left he propped the door shut with a wooden stake because he liked old Marta and didn't want the snow to get into her kitchen. That same day the police called on him. 'We know it was you, anyway,' they said, adding that they'd be back

Marek Marek lay down again. He felt cold, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep hold of a hatchet for long enough to chop firewood. The bird was fluttering inside him, and the fluttering was making his body shiver.

Dusk fell suddenly, as if someone had put out the light outside. Freezing rain struck against the window-panes in steady waves. If only I had a television, thought Marek Marek, as he lay on his back, unable to sleep. Several times in the night he got up and drank water from a bucket; it was cold and horrible. His body kept turning it into tears, which had started flowing that evening and went on till morning, filling his ears and tickling his neck. At daybreak he fell asleep for a while, but his first thought on waking was that there was no more vodka in the water tank.

He got up and peed into a pot. He started looking in the drawers for some string. When he couldn't find any he tore down an old faded curtain and pulled out the cable it had been hanging from. Through the window he saw Whatsisname pushing his bike to Nowa Ruda. Suddenly Marek Marek felt blissful; the rain had finally stopped and grey winter light was pouring in through all the windows. The bird had gone quiet, too; maybe it was already dead. Marek Marek made a noose out of the cable and tied it to a hook by the door on which his mother used to hang frying-pans. He felt like a smoke and started looking for a cigarette. He could hear the rustle of every scrap of paper, the creaking of the floor, and the pitter-pat on the floorboards when he spilled some pills. He couldn't find a cigarette, so he went straight up to the hook, placed the noose around his neck and slumped to the floor. He felt a massive pain in the back of his neck. Briefly the cable grew tighter, then it slackened and slipped off the hook. Marek Marek fell to the ground, not realizing what had happened. Pain radiated throughout his body and the bird began to scream again. 'I've lived like a pig and I'll die like a pig,'

said Marek Marek out loud, and in the empty house it sounded like a challenge. His hands were shaking as he tied the cable to the hook again. He knotted it, tangled and twisted it. The noose was now much higher than before, not so high that he needed a chair, but not so low that he could sit down. He placed the noose over his head, swayed backwards and forwards on his heels for a moment, and then suddenly threw himself to the ground. This time the pain was so great it made his head spin. His mouth gasped for air, and his legs scrabbled helplessly for support, though that wasn't what he wanted. He struggled, amazed at what was happening, until all of a sudden he was seized with such great terror that he wet himself. He looked down at his feet in their threadbare socks, kicking out and slithering in pools of urine. I'll do it tomorrow, he thought hopefully, but he could no longer find any support for his body. He threw himself forward again and tried to prop himself up on his hands, but just then he heard a crash in his head; a bang, a shot, an explosion. He tried to clutch at the wall, but his hand just left a wet, dirty mark. Then he stopped moving, because he still hoped that everything bad would pass by without noticing him. He glued his eyes to the window and a vague, fading thought occurred to him: that Whatsisname would come back. Then the bright rectangle of the window disappeared.

Dreams

Last year I placed an announcement in the *Lower Silesian Exchange* saying that I collect dreams, but I soon went off the idea, because people tried to sell them to me. 'Let's agree a price,' they wrote. 'How about twenty zlotys per dream? That's a fair price.' So I gave up; I would have gone bankrupt on other

people's dreams. I would have been afraid that they'd made them up for the money. Dreams by their very nature have nothing to do with money.

But I did find a website where people record their dreams voluntarily, for free. Each morning new items appear there, in various languages. People record their dreams for others all over the world, for reasons that aren't really clear to me. Maybe the desire to relate your own dreams is as strong as hunger, stronger even, for people who switch on the computer as soon as they wake up, before they've had breakfast, and write, 'Last night I dreamed . . .' Soon I too plucked up the courage and added, to start with, a small, quite trivial dream. This was my passport to reading all those other people's dreams. I soon got into the habit of opening up new worlds on the computer each morning – in winter when it was still dark and the coffee was percolating in the kitchen; and in summer when sunlight was pouring through the windows, the hall door was open on to the terrace, and the dogs were already back from touring their territory.

If you do it regularly, if you carefully read dozens – hundreds, even – of other people's dreams every morning, it's easy to start seeing the similarities between them. I've been wondering for ages whether anyone else has noticed this too. There are nights when everyone seems to dream of running away, nights of war, nights of babies being born, nights of dubious love-making. There are nights spent wandering in labyrinths – in hotels, stations, student hostels, or the dreamers' own flats. Or nights spent opening doors, boxes, chests and cupboards. And there are nights full of travel, when the dreamers negotiate stations, airports, trains, motorways and roadside motels, lose suitcases, wait for tickets, and worry that they won't make their connections on time. Each morning you could string these

dreams together like beads and end up with a unique and beautiful necklace. Based on the most frequently recurring motifs, you could give the nights titles. 'The night of feeding the weak and infirm.' 'The night things fell from the sky.' 'The night of strange animals.' 'The night of receiving letters.' 'The night precious things got lost.' Maybe you could name the days after the previous night's dreams. Or name whole months, years, eras, in which people keep having similar dreams, their minds synchronized in a way that can no longer be felt once the sun is up.

If someone were able to research this idea properly, if they could quantify the characters, images and emotions that appear in dreams, strip them down to their motifs, and apply statistics, including those correlation tests that work like a magic glue, linking things together that seem impossible to connect, maybe they would discover some sense in it all, like the pattern according to which stock exchanges function, or large airports operate.

I have often asked Marta to tell me her dreams, but she just shrugs her shoulders. I don't think she's interested. Even if dreams did come to her at night, I don't think she would allow herself to remember them. She would wipe them away, like spilt milk off her oilcloth with the wild strawberry pattern. She would wring out the rag and air her low-ceilinged kitchen. Her gaze would fall on the pelargoniums; she would rub their leaves between her fingers, and the pungent smell would stifle once and for all whatever she may have seen that night. I'd give a lot to know just one of Marta's dreams.

But she has told me other people's dreams. I have never asked her where she gets them from. Perhaps she makes them up, just like those stories of hers. She makes use of other people's dreams, just as she makes wigs out of other people's hair.

Whenever we drive to town together, while she's waiting for me in the car outside the bank, she stares at people through the window. Afterwards, in the car, as she's rummaging about in her plastic carrier bags, quite casually she always starts telling me something, such as other people's dreams.

I am never sure if there is a borderline between what Marta says and what I hear. I am unable to separate it from her, from me, from what we both know, and what we don't, from what I heard on the radio that morning, or what I read in the weekend newspapers, from the time of day, or even from how the sunlight shines on the villages in the valleys along the way.

The day of cars

We found a car in the forest. It was so well hidden that we stepped into its long bonnet, buried in pine needles. There was a small birch tree growing on the front seat, and a strand of ivy on the steering-wheel. R. said it was German, a pre-war DKW: he knows about cars. The body of the car was completely corroded, and the wheels were half sunk in forest litter. When I tried to open the door on the driver's side, the handle came off in my hand. There were yellow mushrooms growing in cascades on the leather upholstery, right down to the rust-eaten floor. We didn't tell anyone about this find.

That evening another car came out of the forest, from the direction of the border – a smart red Toyota with Swiss registration plates. The setting sun was briefly reflected in its crimson veneer as it coasted down into the valley with its engine off. During the night some agitated border guards with torches came hurrying after it.

Next morning on the Internet there were dreams about cars.

Amos

Krysia from the Cooperative Bank in Nowa Ruda had a dream. It was early in the spring of 1969.

She dreamed she heard voices in her left ear. At first it was a woman's voice that kept on talking and talking, but Krysia couldn't work out what it was saying. She felt worried in the dream. 'How am I going to be able to work if someone keeps droning in my ear?' she said to herself. She thought she might be able to switch the voice off, just like switching off the radio or hanging up the telephone, but she couldn't do it. The source of the sound lay deep in her ear, somewhere in those small, winding corridors, those labyrinths of moist membrane, in the dark caverns inside her head. She tried sticking her fingers in her ears, she tried covering them with her hands, but she couldn't stifle it. She felt as if the whole world must be able to hear this noise. Maybe that was it – the voice was making the whole world vibrate. Some sentences kept being repeated – they were grammatically perfect and sounded fine, but they made no sense, they were just imitations of human speech. Krysia was afraid of them. But then she started hearing a different voice in her ear, a man's voice, clear and pleasant. 'My name is Amos,' he said. It was nice to talk to him. He asked about her work, and about her parents' health, but in fact – or so she imagined – he didn't really need to, because he knew all about her already. 'Where are you?' she asked him hesitantly. 'In Mariand,' he replied; she had heard of this region in central Poland. 'Why can I hear you in my ear?' she asked. 'You're an unusual person,' said Amos, 'and I've fallen in love with you. I love you.' Krysia dreamed the same dream three or four more times, always with the same ending.

In the morning she drank her coffee surrounded by piles of bank documents. Outside sleet was falling and immediately

melting. The damp penetrated the bank's centrally heated offices, permeating the overcoats on their pegs, the bank clerks' imitation leather handbags, their knee boots and even the clients. But on that unusual day Krysia Popłoch, head of the credit division, realized that for the first time in her life she was wholly and unconditionally loved. This discovery was as powerful as a slap in the face. It made her head spin. Her view of the banking hall faded, and all she could hear was silence. Suddenly suffused with this love, Krysia felt like a brand new kettle, filled for the very first time with crystal-clear water. Meanwhile, her coffee had gone cold.

That day she left work early and made her way to the post office. She got out the phone books for all the large cities in central Poland: Łódź, Sieradz, Konin, Kielce, Radom, and Częstochowa, home of the Black Madonna, the Virgin Mary's city. She opened each one at A and ran a painted fingernail down the columns of names. There was no Amos or Amoz in Łódź, Sieradz, Konin and so on. She couldn't find him among the small list of names from the surrounding countryside either. What she felt now would best be described as indignation. She knew he must be out there somewhere. For a while she sat still, her mind a blank, and then she began all over again, taking in Radom, Tarnów, Lublin and Włocławek as well. She found Lidia Amoszewicz and the Amosińskis. Then in desperation she began to contrive new combinations: Amos, Soma, Maso, Samo, Omas, until finally her painted fingernails broke the dream code – there he was, A. Mos, 54 Sienkiewicz Street, Częstochowa.

Krysia lived in the countryside, and every morning a dirty blue bus took her to town, crawling up the twists and turns of the road like a dingy beetle. In winter, when darkness fell early, its blazing eyes swept over the stony mountain slopes. The bus was a blessing – it gave people the chance to know the world

beyond the mountains. All manner of journeys started in it. Krysia's journey to work took twenty minutes, from the moment the bus picked her up at the stop to the moment she stood before the massive doors of the bank. In those twenty minutes the world changed out of all recognition. The forest became houses, the mountain pastures became town squares, the meadows became streets, and the stream became a river, which was a different colour every day, because unfortunately it flowed past the Blachobyt textile mill. Still on the bus, Krysia would change her gumboots for a pair of court shoes. Her heels clicked on the broad steps of the old German building.

Krysia was the most elegant girl at the bank. She had a fashionable hairstyle – a well-shaped blonde perm with carefully dyed roots. The fluorescent lighting brought out its highlights. Her mascara-coated lashes cast subtle shadows on her smooth cheeks. Her pearly lipstick discreetly emphasized the shape of her mouth. As she grew older, she wore more and more make-up. Nowadays she sometimes told herself, 'Stop, that's enough,' but she worried that the passing years were blurring her features, depriving her face of definition. She thought her eyebrows were thinning, her blue irises fading, and the lines of her lips growing fainter and fainter – her whole face was becoming foggy, as if it were trying to disappear. This was Krysia's greatest fear – that her face would disappear before it had developed and truly come into being.

At the age of thirty she still lived with her parents. Their house stood beside the winding, pot-holed local highway, looking hopeful, as if it expected this location to bring it a role in history, in the march of passing armies, in the adventures of treasure hunters, or in the border guards' pursuit of bootleggers from the Czech Republic. But neither the highway nor the house had much good fortune. Nothing ever happened, except that the

forest above the house grew sparser, like Krysia's eyebrows. Her father kept chopping down the young birch trees to make poles and rods, and every year he cut down the spruces for Christmas trees. Meanwhile the pathways in the tall grass grew blurred, just like the line of her mouth, and the sky-blue walls of their house kept fading, like Krysia's eyes.

At home Krysia was quite important; she earned money and did the shopping, carrying it home in bags her mother had made. She had her own room in the attic, with a sofa-bed and a wardrobe. But only at the bank did she really start to come into her own. Her office was separated from the banking hall by a plywood partition as thin as cardboard. As she sat at her desk she could hear the hubbub of the bank – doors creaking, heavy farm boots shuffling across the wooden floor, the murmur of women's voices gossiping and the rattle of the two remaining abacuses that the management hadn't yet got round to replacing with the modern machines with handles that made a whirring sound.

At about ten the daily coffee-drinking ritual began, announced by the clatter of aluminium teaspoons and the sound of glasses striking softly against saucers – the usual office chimes. The precious ground coffee brought from home in jam-jars was shared equally between the glasses, and formed a thick brown skin on the surface, briefly holding up the torrents of sugar. The smell of coffee filled the bank to the ceiling, and the farmers queuing for service kicked themselves for having run into the sacred coffee hour.

After the Easter holiday the bank received information about a training course for employees to be held in Częstochowa. Krysia saw it as an undeniable sign and decided to go. As she was packing her things into her synthetic leather bag, she thought of God, and that, despite what they say about him, he always turns up at the crucial moment.

Sluggish trains full of crumpled people took her there. There were no seats free in the compartments, so she stood glued to a grubby window in the corridor and dozed standing up. Someone got out in the middle of the night, and at last she could sit down. Squashed between hot bodies in the dry air she fell into a heavy, solid sleep, without any images at all, not even the tail-ends of thoughts. Only when she awoke did she realize that she was on a journey; until then she had just been drifting about in space, casually changing location. Only sleep closes the old and opens the new – one person dies and another awakes. This black, featureless space between days is the real journey. Luckily all the trains from Nowa Ruda to the world at large run at night. It crossed her mind that after this journey nothing would ever be the same.

She found herself in Częstochowa before daybreak. It was still too early to go anywhere, so she ordered some tea at the station bar and warmed her hands on the glass. At the neighbouring tables sat old women swathed in checked shawls and men stupefied by tobacco – husbands and fathers crushed by life, with leathery faces like old wallets, and children flushed with sleep, from whose half-open mouths trickled thin streaks of dribble.

Two lemon teas and one coffee later, dawn finally came. She found Sienkiewicz Street and walked right up the middle of it, because the cars weren't awake yet. She looked into the windows and saw thick, pleated curtains and rubber plants nestling up against the glass. In some of the houses the lights were still shining weakly. By this light people were hurriedly getting dressed and eating breakfast, women were drying out their tights over the gas or packing sandwiches for school, beds were being made, trapping the warmth of bodies until the following night, there was a smell of burned milk, shoelaces were being threaded back

into their nice safe holes, and the radio was broadcasting news that no one was listening to. Then she came across the first bread queue. Everyone in the queue was silent.

Number 54 Sienkiewicz Street was a large, grey apartment block with a fishmonger's shop on the ground floor and a canyon-like courtyard. Krysia stood in front of it and slowly studied the windows. My God, they were so ordinary. She stood there for half an hour, until she stopped feeling the cold.

The training course was extremely boring. In the exercise book she had bought specially to make notes, Krysia doodled with her pen. The green cloth on the chairman's table cheered her up a bit. Absent-mindedly, she stroked it. The Cooperative Bank employees seemed all alike to her. The women had fashionably cut peroxide hair and bright pink lips. The men wore navy blue suits and had pigskin briefcases, as if by mutual agreement. They cracked jokes in the cigarette breaks.

For dinner there was bread and cheese and mugs of tea. After dinner everyone went through to the clubroom, where vodka and gherkins had appeared on the tables. Someone produced a set of tin shot glasses from his briefcase. A man's hand wandered over a woman's nylon-clad knees.

Krysia went to bed feeling rather tipsy. Her two room-mates turned up around dawn and shushed each other in a loud whisper. And so it went on for three days.

On the fourth day she stood before a brown door bearing a china nameplate reading 'A. Mos'. She knocked.

The door was opened by a tall, thin man in pyjamas with a cigarette in his mouth. He had dark, bloodshot eyes, as if he hadn't slept for days. They blinked when she asked, 'A. Mos?'

'Yes,' he said. 'A. Mos.'

She smiled, because she thought she recognized his voice. 'Well, I'm Krysia.'

Surprised, he stepped aside and let her into the hall. The flat was small and cramped, flooded in fluorescent light, which made it look grubby, like a station waiting room. There were boxes of books, piles of newspapers and half-packed suitcases lying about. Steam came gushing through the open bathroom door.

'It's me,' she repeated. 'I've come.'

The man turned round and laughed. 'But who are you?' he said. 'Do I know you?' He clapped his hand to his brow. 'Of course, you're . . . you're . . .' he said, snapping his fingers in the air.

Krysia realized that he didn't recognize her, but there was nothing odd about that. After all, he knew her in a different way, through a dream, from the inside, not the way people usually know each other.

'I'll explain everything. May I go on in?'

The man hesitated. The ash from his cigarette fell to the floor and he ushered her into the sitting-room. She took off her shoes and went in.

'I'm packing, as you can see,' said the man, explaining the mess. He removed the crumpled bedclothes from the sofa-bed and took them into another room, then came back and sat down opposite her. His faded pyjamas exposed a strip of bare chest; it was thin and bony.

'Mr A. Mos, do you sometimes have dreams?' she asked hesitantly and immediately knew she had made a mistake. The man laughed, slapped his thighs and gave her a look that seemed ironic.

'Well I never – a young lady comes to see a strange man and asks if he has dreams. It's just like a dream.'

'But I know you.'

'Do you? How come you know me, but I don't know you? Oh, maybe we met at Jaś's party? At Jaś Latka's?'

She shook her head.

'No? Where was it then?'

'Mr A. Mos . . .'

'My name's Andrzej. Andrzej Mos.'

'Krysia Popłoch,' she said. They both stood up, shook hands and sat down again awkwardly.

'So . . .' he said after a while.

'My name's Krysia Popłoch . . .'

'I know that.'

'. . . I'm thirty years old, I work in a bank, where I'm quite senior. I live in Nowa Ruda – do you know where that is?'

'Somewhere near Katowice?'

'No, no. It's near Wrocław.'

'Aha,' he said distractedly. 'Would you like a beer?'

'No thank you.'

'Well, I'm going to have one.'

He stood up and went into the kitchen. Krysia noticed a typewriter on the desk with a piece of paper in it. Suddenly she got the idea that what she should do and say next was written on it, so she got up to take a look, but Andrzej Mos came back with a bottle of beer.

'Actually, I thought you were from Częstochowa. For a while there I even thought I knew you.'

'Really?' said Krysia, perking up.

'I even thought . . .' he said, his eyes shining. He took a large swig of the bottle.

'What?'

'You know how it is. You don't remember everything. Not always. Was there something between us? At the party at . . .'

'No,' said Krysia quickly and felt herself go red. 'I've never seen you before.'

'But didn't you say you know me?'

'Yes, I do, but only your voice.'

'My voice? God, what are you on about? I must be dreaming. A girl comes round and insists she knows me, but it's the first time she's ever seen me in her life. She only knows my voice . . .'

Suddenly he froze with the bottle to his lips and his eyes bored into Krysia. 'Now I know. You're from the secret police. You know my voice because you've been tapping my phone, right?'

'No. I work in a bank . . .'

'All right, all right, but I've got my passport now and I'm leaving. I'm leaving, get it? For the free world. I'm packing up, as you can see. It's all over, you people can't do anything to me now.'

'Please don't . . .'

'What do you want?'

'I dreamed about you. I found you through the phone book.'

The man lit a cigarette and stood up. He started pacing up and down the cluttered room. Krysia took her identity card out of her handbag and placed it open on the table.

'Please take a look, I'm not from the secret police.'

He leaned over the table and looked at it.

'That doesn't prove a thing,' he said. 'You don't write in an identity card that you're a secret policeman, do you?'

'What can I do to convince you?'

He stood over her, smoking his cigarette.

'You know what? It's getting late. I'm just on my way out. I have an appointment. And besides, I'm packing. I've got all sorts of important things to see to.'

Krysia took her identity card from the table and put it back in her handbag. Her throat felt painfully tight.

'I'll be off, then.'

He didn't protest. He saw her to the door.

'So you dreamed about me?'

'Yes,' she said, slipping on her shoes.

'And you found me through the phone book?'

She nodded.

'Goodbye. I'm sorry,' she said.

'Goodbye.'

She ran down the stairs and found herself in the street. She walked down the hill towards the station, crying. Her mascara ran and stung her eyes, turning the world into a brightly coloured blur. At the ticket office she was told that the last train for Wrocław had just left. The next one was in the morning, so she went to the station bar and ordered some tea. Her mind was a blank as she sat staring at the slice of lemon floating limply in the glass. From the platforms a damp, foggy night came drifting into the station hall. This is no reason not to believe in dreams, it finally occurred to her. They always make sense, they never get it wrong – it's the real world that doesn't live up to their perfection. Phone books tell lies, trains go in the wrong direction, the letters in the names of cities get mixed up, and people forget their own names. Only dreams are real. She thought she could hear that warm voice full of love in her left ear again.

'I called the travel information. The last train to Nowa Ruda has already gone,' said Andrzej Mos, and sat down at her table. He drew a little cross on the wet oilcloth. 'Your make-up's run.'

She took out a handkerchief, wetted the corner with spit and wiped her eyelids.

'So you dreamed about me? It's an incredible honour to be dreamed about by someone you don't know, who lives at the other end of the country . . . So what happened in the dream?'

'Nothing. You just spoke to me.'

'What did I say?'

'That I'm unusual and that you love me.'

He snapped his fingers and took a long stare at the ceiling.

'What a crazy way to pick a guy up! I take my hat off to you.'

She didn't reply, just went on sipping her tea.

'I wish I was at home now,' she said at last.

'Let's go to my place. I've got a spare bed.'

'No. I'm going to wait here.'

'As you wish.'

He went to the buffet and got himself a mug of beer.

'I don't think you are A. Mos. I mean not the one I dreamed about. I must have gone wrong somewhere. Maybe it's another city, not Częstochowa.'

'Maybe.'

'I'll have to look again.'

The man plonked his mug down on the table with such force that he spilled some beer.

'Pity I won't know the results.'

'But you do have a similar voice.'

'Let's go to my place. You can spend the night in a bed, not at a bar table.'

He could see that she was wavering. Without the ghastly mascara she looked younger, less provincial.

'Let's go,' he repeated, and she stood up without a word.

He took her luggage and they went back up the hill. Sienkiewicz Street was deserted now.

'And what else was in the dream?' he asked, as he made up the sofa-bed in the main room for her.

'I don't want to talk about it any more. It doesn't matter.'

'Shall we have a beer? Or some vodka as a nightcap? Mind if I light up?'

She agreed. He disappeared into the kitchen. and after a moment's hesitation she went up to the typewriter. Before she had even read the title of the poem written there her heart began

to beat. It said: 'A Night in Mariand'. She stood over the typewriter as if rooted to the spot. Behind her, clattering about in the kitchen, was Amos from her dream, a real, live skinny man with bloodshot eyes, someone who knew everything and understood everything, who entered into people's dreams, sowing love and anxiety, someone who moved the world aside as if it were a curtain concealing some other, elusive truth.

Her fingers trembled as she touched the keys.

'I write poetry,' he said behind her. 'I've even published a small volume.'

She couldn't turn round.

'Do sit down. It doesn't matter any more, because I'm off to the free world now. Give me your address and I'll write to you.'

She could hear his voice just behind her, in her left ear.

'Do you like it? Do you read poetry? It's just a draft, I haven't finished it yet. Do you like it?'

She let her head drop. The blood was pounding in her ears. He gently touched her arm.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

She turned round to face him and saw his eyes fixed on her curiously. She could smell his scent – of cigarettes, dust and paper. She snuggled up to that scent, and they stood there without moving for several minutes. For a while he held his hands away from her, wavering, then he began to stroke her back.

'It is you, I've found you,' she whispered.

He touched her cheek and kissed her.

'If you like.'

He pushed his fingers into her peroxide hair and pressed his lips to hers. Then he pulled her on to the sofa-bed and started to undress her. She didn't like this, it was too abrupt, she wasn't going to enjoy it, but it had to be done, like a sacrifice. She had to allow him anything, so she slipped out of her dress, and her

blouse, her suspender belt and bra. His thin rib cage loomed before her eyes, dry and angular like a stone.

'So how did you hear me in the dream?' he asked in a breathy whisper.

'You spoke in my ear.'

'Which one?'

'The left one.'

'Here?' he asked and slipped his tongue into her ear.

She squeezed her eyelids shut. She could no longer break free. It was too late. He was pinning her down with the whole weight of his body, touching her, penetrating her, piercing her. But somehow she knew that this had to happen, that she had to give Amos his due first, before she'd be able to take him away with her and plant him in front of her home like a huge tree. And so she surrendered to the alien body, and even embraced it awkwardly, joining in the bizarre, rhythmical dance.

'Cheers,' the man said afterwards and lit a cigarette.

Krysia got dressed and sat down beside him. He poured vodka into two shot glasses.

'How was it for you?' he asked, briefly glancing at her and draining the vodka.

'Fine,' she replied.

'Let's get some sleep.'

'Already?'

'You've got a train to catch tomorrow.'

'I know.'

'I'd better set the alarm.'

A. Mos shuffled off to the bathroom. Krysia sat still and looked around Amos's temple. The walls were painted orange, but the cold fluorescent light made them look a dull shade of blue. Where a patch of hessian had come away from the wall she could see a brighter orange colour. It seemed to be shining, dazzling her. A

curtain yellow with cigarette smoke hung at the window, and to her right stood the abandoned desk and the typewriter with 'A Night in Mariand' in it.

'Why did you fall in love with me?' she asked when he came back. 'What makes me different from other people?'

'For God's sake, you're cracked.'

'What do you mean, I'm cracked?'

'You're crazy. Off your rocker.'

He poured himself a shot of vodka and downed it in one.

'You came half-way across Poland to see a complete stranger,' he said. 'You told him your dream and you went to bed with him. That's it. You're cracked.'

'Why are you lying to me? Why don't you admit you're Amos and you know all about me?'

'I'm not Amos. My name's Andrzej Mos.'

'What about Mariand?'

'What Mariand?'

'"A Night in Mariand". What's Mariand?'

He laughed and sat on a chair beside her.

'It's a pub in the market place. All the local boozers drink there. I wrote a poem about it. I know it's bad. I've written better things.'

She stared at him incredulously.

The return journey was filled with the crash of closing doors – the door of the night train crashed shut, as did the doors of compartments, station lavatories and buses. Finally the front door of the house gave a hollow crash behind her. Krysia threw down her bag and went to bed. She slept all day, and when her anxious mother called her down to dinner in the evening, Krysia had forgotten that she had been anywhere at all. Sleep, like an eraser, had wiped out the entire journey. A few nights later Krysia heard the familiar voice in her left ear. 'It's me, Amos, where have you been?'

'How come you don't know where I've been?' 'I don't,' he replied. 'Don't you travel about with me?' she asked. The voice fell silent. Krysia felt that this silence expressed some sort of embarrassment. 'Never go so far away again,' he answered in her ear shortly after. 'What do you mean by far away?' she asked him angrily. Maybe her tone frightened him, because he said nothing, and Krysia had to wake up.

After the trip to Częstochowa nothing was the same. The streets of Nowa Ruda dried out and were flooded with sunshine. The girls put bunches of forsythia on their desks. The varnish began to peel off Krysia's nails, the roots of her peroxide hair grew dark and the fair ends worked their way down to her shoulders. At noon a large window in the banking hall was opened, letting the din from the street flood in – children's voices, the noise of cars streaming by, the rapid clatter of stiletto heels, and the flutter of pigeons' wings. It was a pleasure to leave work. The narrow streets beckoned you to enter, to look at the people's faces and be reminded of a painting of a courtyard scene. The cafés were inviting, their smoke-filled expanses full of curious glances and idle conversation. Even better, they offered the timeless fragrance of coffee brewing in glasses and the clink of metal teaspoons.

In May Krysia went to see a clairvoyant and asked him about her future. The clairvoyant read her horoscope, then spent a long time concentrating with his eyes shut.

'What do you want to know?' he asked her.

'What's going to happen to me?' she said, and he must have been able to see into distant space beneath his eyelids, because his eyeballs kept moving from left to right as if he were surveying inner landscapes.

Krysia lit a cigarette and waited. The clairvoyant saw ash-grey valleys, with the remains of cities and villages. The scene was dead still, and was growing dimmer from moment to moment.

The sky was orange, low and thin as nylon. There was nothing moving, not a breath of wind, not a hint of life. The trees looked like stone pillars, as if frozen by the same sight as Lot's wife. He thought he could hear them creaking gently. Krysia wasn't in this landscape, nor was he there either, nor anyone. He didn't know what to say. He only felt a spasm of fear in his stomach at the thought that now he would have to lie and invent something.

'No one dies for ever. Your soul will come back again many times, until it finds what it's looking for,' he said, then took a deep breath and added, 'You'll get married and have a child. It will fall ill, and you'll look after it. Your husband will be older than you and will leave you a widow. Your child will go away from you, far away, over the ocean perhaps. You will be very old when you die. Dying will not cause you pain.'

That was all. Krysia went away calm, because she knew all that already. She had spent her money in vain. She could have bought a willow-green bouclé blouse of the sort that were arriving in bundles from abroad. In the night she heard Amos's voice again. 'I love you, you're an unusual person,' he said.

In her sleepy state she thought she recognized the voice, and felt sure she knew whose it was, and she fell asleep happy. But as happens with dreams and semi-dreams, in the morning it had all melted away and she was left with nothing but a vague impression of knowing something, without being quite sure what. And that was all.

Peas

'You don't have to leave home to know the world,' said Marta suddenly, as we were shelling peas on the steps in front of her house.

I asked how. Maybe she meant by reading books, watching the news, listening to the radio, surfing the Internet, reading the papers, or going to the shop for gossip. But what she had in mind was the futility of travel.

When you're travelling you have to take care of yourself in order to get by, you have to keep an eye on yourself and your place in the world. It means concentrating on yourself, thinking about yourself and looking after yourself. So when you're travelling all you really encounter is yourself, as if that were the whole point of it. When you're at home you simply are, you don't have to struggle with anything or achieve anything. You don't have to worry about railway connections and timetables, you don't need to experience any thrills or disappointments. You can put yourself to one side – and that's when you see the most.

She said something like that and fell silent. It surprised me, because Marta has never been further than Wambierzyce, Nowa Ruda and Wałbrzych.

Some of the peas were maggoty so we threw them into the grass. Sometimes I suspect that whatever Marta has said is completely different from what I have heard.

Then we started chatting about all sorts of things – about Bobol's dogs, the invasion of slugs on the lettuce patch, and wild cherry juice. Marta kept leaving large gaps between sentences, and my words kept sticking in my throat. R. laughs at us whenever he happens to overhear our conversation. He says we talk to each other as if we're asleep. Marta sometimes becomes animated if she thinks of a wig she made to order a good dozen years ago, or more. Then her fingers wake up and she demonstrates some special sort of plaiting, or an ingenious parting.

This sort of conversation always runs out of steam eventually, and we go on sitting on her steps or on my terrace, on metal

chairs that have started to rust from last year's rain. The silence that has sown itself between us grows up all around us, hungrily devouring our space. There's no air left to breathe. And the longer we stay silent, the more impossible it becomes to say anything at all, the more remote and less important all kinds of topics seem to be. This sort of silence is velvety, warm, dry and silky, nice to touch. But sometimes I've been afraid Marta might not feel the same way as me and might lash out at that silence of ours with a thoughtless 'Well, yes . . .' or 'That's how it is . . .' or even an innocent sigh. And then this worry starts to ruin my enjoyment of the silence, because without wanting to I become its sentry, and at the same time its prisoner, and I tense myself up, bristling in readiness for the moment when this smooth and wonderful atmosphere, so simple and natural, will become unbearable and finally come to an end. And then what shall we say to each other?

But Marta always proves wiser than I. Without a sound she gets up and wanders off to her rhubarb patch, or to the wigs she keeps in cardboard boxes, and the mutual silence that we have cultivated together trails after her, growing even more intense. Then I'm left alone in the midst of it, two-dimensional and featureless, only half existing, as if in a drawn-out moment of revelation.

Coelacanth

The northern edge of the local forest is always in shadow. The snow lies there until April, as if held to the ground by suction – a great white parasite. There are similar places in the mountains that the sun doesn't reach at all, or only at a certain time of year. Marta told me about some caves, niches and clefts in the rock,

one of which is home to a primeval blind creature, a small, pure white lizard that lives there and never dies. It does die, I replied, every creature has to die – maybe the species never changes, but each individual specimen must die. But I understand what Marta means, just as once upon a time as a child I thought the coelacanth lived for ever, that this so-called representative of an extinct species had eluded death, or maybe a single one had been chosen for immortality, to bear witness to the existence of its species for ever.

Guidebooks on Pietno

Pietno appears in the guidebooks as a sort of anomaly, because it is definitely not a tourist attraction. For instance, in the well-known *Pink Guide* to the Sudety Mountains it says that Pietno is the only village in Poland located in a spot where the sun doesn't shine from October to March, because to the east and south it is surrounded by the Suche Mountains, and to the west by one of the highest elevations of the Włodzicki Hills. In the 1949 *Guide to the Mountains of Silesia* it says: 'Pietno, a settlement situated to the north-west of Nowa Ruda, on Marcowski Stream. First mentioned in 1743 (as Einsiedler). Population in 1778 – 57; in 1840 – 112; in 1933 – 92; after the war, in 1947 – 39. In 1840 there were 21 houses, and the owner was Count von Goetzen. On the lower part of the stream a watermill was erected. After 1945 the settlement was partly abandoned. The village is located in a deep, picturesque valley. It is known for its unusual location, as a result of which the rays of the sun cannot reach it in the winter months.'

Velvet foot

The velvet foot is a mushroom that grows in winter. From October to April it lives on dead trees. It smells wonderful and tastes delicious. It's hard not to spot it, because it's as yellow as honey. But no one gathers mushrooms in winter. There's a general consensus that the mushroom-picking season is in the autumn, so the velvet foot is like a person born too late, in the wrong era, a person to whom everything seems dead and rigid; it lives at a time when the world is over and done with for its kind. All around it can see nothing but a gloomy winter landscape, and sometimes powdery snow covers its yellow caps in white crowns. It can see the remains of other fungi – king boletus coated in white, their stalks weakened by decay, fallen birch boletus, and shelf mushrooms soggy with damp.

Agnieszka almost always comes for coffee when I'm making velvet foot croquettes, so I inevitably associate her with those winter mushrooms. She sits in the chair that Marta is so fond of. Agnieszka lives up the hill from Pietno, and can see it from above in all its splendour and misery. She can see drunken men and dawdling children. She can see women shakily dragging wood down the hill – probably drunk too. She can hear dogs whining, cows mooing, Jasiek Bobol's radio booming – only ever able to receive the one, local station – she can see a stream full of duck droppings, moulting cats, broken machinery, disused old pumps, and a murky shadow over the whole village. That's why Agnieszka has so much to say. For days on end she sits on a little bench in front of her house crocheting doilies and looking down on Pietno from above. She has a full-colour, three-dimensional, panoramic view, far more interesting than satellite TV. Besides, Agnieszka's husband is never at

home. He grazes his sheep God knows where, and in winter he works in the forest. And he drinks, like all of them. They have never been blessed with children, so Agnieszka is bound to talk a lot, whenever she finds someone willing to listen to her. If you do have children, your supply of words soon gets used up.

But today she wasn't drawn to the subject of Pietno. She let her gaze glide past the frying-pan full of pancakes and took tiny sips at her coffee.

'When I was still working at Blachobyt, those were the days,' she said, and fell into a long silence. I knew she had been laid off several years ago.

The Blachobyt enterprise used to organize annual outings for its workers. Agnieszka had once been on one, to Auschwitz. It was a nice trip, she said. On the coach the men drank vodka, while the women sang all the songs they knew, the whole way. Agnieszka would never forget Auschwitz. There was a shop there, not a large one, a grocer's, built out of breeze blocks. When they got out of the coach after the all-night journey, this shop had just opened. It turned out that they had a supply of cooking oil. In those days there was absolutely nothing in the shops – mustard and vinegar at best. And here they were selling oil, as much as you wanted, not one or two bottles each, mind, but as much as you wanted. So they all queued up and got the oil, as much as they wanted. Agnieszka got about ten bottles. They sold them to her. They didn't ask any questions, they didn't demand ration cards, they didn't count them. She had that oil for about two years, because how much oil can you use? It's only for chips, mushrooms and fish – you don't use oil for much else, do you? The oil from Auschwitz may have lasted for as much as three years, even.

That was all she said.

The recipe for velvet foot croquettes is as follows:

ten pancakes
half a kilo of mushrooms
one onion
two slices of stale black bread
salt, pepper, nutmeg
two tablespoons of breadcrumbs
half a tablespoon of margarine
butter to fry the onions in
a tablespoon of sour cream
half a glass of milk
one egg

Glaze the onion in butter. Then add the finely chopped mushrooms, season with salt and pepper and add a pinch of nutmeg. Fry for ten minutes. Meanwhile, soak the bread in milk, squeeze it out and blend it in the food processor. Add it to the mushrooms with the egg and sour cream. Wrap the mixture in the pancakes, roll them in breadcrumbs and fry in margarine.

On being a mushroom

If I weren't a person, I'd be a mushroom. An indifferent, insensitive mushroom with a cold, slimy skin, hard and soft at the same time. I would grow on fallen trees; I'd be murky and sinister, ever silent, and with my creeping mushroomy fingers I would suck the last drop of sunlight out of them. I would grow on things that had died. I would penetrate that deadness right through to the pure earth – there my mushroomy fingers would come to a stop. I would be smaller than the trees and bushes, but

I would sprout up over blackberry patches. I would be ephemeral, but as a human being I am ephemeral anyway. I would have no interest in the sun, my gaze would not be drawn to it, and never again would I long for it to rise. I would yearn only for the damp. I would expose my body to the mist and rain, I would catch the moist air in droplets. I would make no distinction between night and day, for why should I?

I would have the same capacity as all mushrooms to hide myself from humans by confusing their timid minds. Mushrooms are hypnotists; they were given this property instead of claws, fast legs, teeth and intelligence. Mushroom pickers would dozily pass by above me with their eyes fixed on the colourful, twinkling images created by the sunlight and the leaves. I would tangle their legs up in the forest litter and withered clumps of moss. For hours I would keep perfectly still on purpose, neither growing nor ageing, until I had reached the icy conviction that I have power not only over people, but also over time. I would only grow at the most important moments of the day and night – at dawn and at dusk, when everything else is busy waking up or falling asleep.

I would be generous to all insect life; I would give away my body to snails and maggots. I would feel no fear, I would never be afraid of death. What is death, I would think – the only thing they can do to you is to tear you from the ground, slice you up, cook you and eat you.

Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat

'Marta, Marta, you take care of everything,' said Whatsisname to Marta when he met her on the road making channels with a stick for the water to drain away.

Then Whatsisname went on his way, pushing his bike down to Nowa Ruda for cigarettes. I saw them through the open window. Marta finished making her channels and picked her way downhill. The grass was already tall, just right for mowing. I thought I could detect Marta's smell all the way from my house – the smell of her old cardigan, her snow white hair, her thin, delicate skin. It's the smell of an object that has been lying in the same place for a long time. That's why it's so noticeable in old houses. It's the smell of something that was once soft and pliable, but has now gone hard; it hasn't died, but has solidified – in fact, death is no longer a threat to it. It's like a dab of jam that has stuck to the edge of a plate. It's the smell of sleep soaked into the bedclothes, the smell of loss of consciousness – that's how your skin smells when they finally revive you with an injection, shake you and slap your face. That's how your breath smells too, when you have your face pressed to the window-pane and your breath comes bouncing off the glass.

That's how old people smell. Marta is old, though not very old. If it were still the past, if I were as young as I was when I worked in the old people's ward, Marta would seem very old to me. She would be shuffling about the hot, dry corridors clutching a plastic bag. Her nails would have grown cuticles for lack of activity.

That afternoon we drove to Wambierzyce to see the carpenter someone from the village had recommended to me. After seeing to my business with him we went to the basilica. Marta had only been there once or twice a long time ago, despite living so nearby. She seemed captivated. She spent the longest time looking at the votive icons hung about in the naves, human gratitude turned into pictures, showing all kinds of misfortunes and happy endings. They provided dozens of little

case-histories of illnesses, metamorphoses and conversions, as well as a parade of past fashions, with terse German captions – evidence of the existence of miracles among cloisters full of shadows.

On the steps we silently ate ice lollies, which made us feel cold, so to warm ourselves up and shake off the numbing effects of our visit to the basilica, we set off down the narrow little paths of the Way of the Cross. All of a sudden Marta joyfully pointed out one of the stations of the cross to me.

On the cross hung a woman, a girl, in such a tight-fitting dress that her breasts looked naked beneath the paint. Her tresses curled exquisitely around her sad, rough face, as if the stone the face was carved from had weathered faster than the hair. One shoe was poking out from under her dress, while the other foot was bare; from this I recognized that the same figure hung in the little chapel on the road to Agnieszka's. But that one had a beard, so I had always thought it was Christ in an exceptionally long robe. Underneath was written 'Sanc. Wilgefortis. Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat'. Marta said she was Holy Care.

Then it began to rain, and the scent of fresh greenery filled the air. The little town was virtually empty. In the souvenir shop Marta bought herself a cut-price wooden box inscribed 'A Souvenir of Wambierzyce'. Among the booklets on the lives of the saints for one new zloty I found what I was destined to find that day: the life of Saint Kummernis, also known as Wilgefortis, with no page numbers, no author's name, no year or place of publication, but on the cover, in the top right-hand corner someone had crossed out '30 groshys' and written '10,000 zlotys', a reminder of the era of rapid inflation.

The Life of Kummernis of Schonau, written with the aid of the Holy Spirit and of the Mother Superior of the Benedictine Order at Kloster by Paschalis, monk

I. As I set out to write the life of Kummernis I call upon the Holy Spirit living within her to grant me, as it did her, rare virtues and to bestow on me the mercy of a martyr's death, and give me the eloquence and litheness of mind to relate the events of her life efficiently and in order, and the ability to put them into words. For I am a simple, uneducated man; moreover I have gone astray, and the realm of the word is not my natural element. Therefore I beg forgiveness for my simplicity, perhaps naïvety, and boldness too in undertaking the task of describing the life and death of such a great and unusual person, worthy of an equally great and unusual pen. The aim of my work is honest – I wish to bear witness to the truth and to record events that happened many years before I appeared on earth, but that did indeed take place. And to close the mouths of those who, without having heard her story, claim that she did not exist.

The beginning of Kummernis's life

II. Kummernis was born imperfect in her father's eyes, but only according to a human understanding of imperfection – for her father longed for a son. Sometimes, however, what is imperfect in the world of men is perfect in the world of God. She was the sixth daughter in a row. Her mother died giving birth to her, and so one could say that they crossed paths – one came into the world as the other departed it. Kummernis was baptized Wilgefortis, or Wilga.

This took place in the village of Schonau, which lies at the foot of the mountains. The mountains shield it from the north winds, so it is warm there, and on the southern slopes a grapevine is still known to grow, a sign that these lands were once nearer to God and warmer. To

the west rise other majestic mountains, flat-topped, as if they were once tables for giants, while to the east Schonau is surrounded by gloomy uplands covered in forest. From there to the south stretches the great panorama of the Czech plain, an invitation to journey into the world. And so Wilga's father never kept his seat at home warm for long. All year he went hunting, and every spring he set out on lengthy crusades. He was strong in stature, violent and quick to anger. He secured foster-mothers and nursemaids for his daughters – that was really all he could do for them. A few months after Wilga's birth he left for Prague to attend the assembly of all the crusading knights, whence they set out for the Holy Land.

The childhood of Kummernis

III. Wilga spent the first years of her life among women: her sisters, foster-mothers and servants. The house was full of the sound of the siblings' voices. Once her father, wanting to call her to him, forgot her name, for he had so many children and so many things on his mind, had waged so many wars in his life and had so many serfs that his daughter's name had slipped his memory. One winter her father came home from an expedition bringing a new wife with him. The little girl loved her stepmother more than anything. She was full of admiration for her beauty, her fine voice and her fair hands that could draw wonderful sounds from musical instruments. Whenever she gazed upon her she hoped that one day she would be just like her – ethereal, beautiful and delicate as thistledown.

And Wilga's body took the same route as her dreams – the little girl grew up and became beautiful, so that all who saw her marvelled in silence at this miracle of creation. Therefore many gentlemen and knights impatiently awaited the return of the girl's father, lord and master, each wanting to be the first to make his proposal and to claim her in marriage.

IV. One day, when all the women had been awaiting the return of their father, husband, lord and master for two years, a young knight appeared, weary with journeying, and announced that he believed he had seen the baron's body among those fallen in battle in a distant, sun-scorched land. This man stayed with them all summer and while walking in the garden comforted Wilga's stepmother with sweet songs and tales of azure seas and the golden gates of Jerusalem. But then he vanished for ever. Her stepmother wept, and her instrument lay on the floor with broken strings.

Soon after, one dark night, Wilga's father came home. Torches were lit and everyone went out to greet him. He was shaggy and dirty, and stank of blood. His horse dropped down from exhaustion, but the baron didn't even give it a second glance. His gaze moved across the faces of his daughters and came to rest on the beauty of Wilga, as though she were a stranger.

A few days later Wilga's beloved stepmother died of a haemorrhage, and her father, without observing the mourning period, gave five of his daughters in marriage to his best knights in a single day. As the only one too young for marriage, Wilga was assigned to the convent.

Her first sojourn at the Benedictine convent

V. Beyond Broumov, in the hamlet of Kloster, was a convent founded by the baron's grandfather. There he took his youngest daughter. And as they were riding over the mountains the baron had to turn his face away from her, so painful did he find her beauty. And his soul despaired that something so beautiful, so very desirable and beloved, should become distant and unattainable.

The sisters received the girl with joy, for it soon appeared that her spiritual beauty was equal to her physical beauty, and even surpassed it. They taught the child many things, and as the rules of the order make great demands on a novice, Kummernis was soon able to

read, write, and sing beautifully, thus rendering praise to Our Lord. And when anyone stood in her presence, a great, comforting warmth radiated from her, so that even a dark chamber seemed bright, and in her speech there was wisdom unparalleled for her age and her judgements were mature. Her frail body imparted a balmy fragrance and roses were found in her bed, even though it was winter. Once, when she was set before the mirror, the image of the face of the Son of God appeared on its surface, and remained there until next day.

The start of Kummernis's novitiate, her preparation for devotion to the Lord

VI. It was then that the most terrible thing happened – her father returned from his latest expedition, and seeing how she had matured and how much more painful her presence was to him, he resolved to give her in marriage to his friend from the wars, Wolfram von Pannewitz. So he sent an envoy to the convent with a letter demanding that she be made ready to leave it. And as she had not yet taken the veil, the abbess did not dare to refuse the baron.

Anyone who has ever seen the mountains in late autumn, when the last frost-glazed leaves still hang on the trees, when the earth is warmer than the sky and is slowly wasting away beneath the first snows, when its stony bones are starting to protrude from under the withered grass, when the darkness starts to seep from the washed-out margins of the horizon, when sounds suddenly become sharp and hang in the frosty air like knives – he who has seen all this has witnessed the death of the world. But I would say the world is always dying, day after day, though for some reasons only in late autumn is the entire mystery of that death laid bare. And the only living place to resist this decay is the human body, but not all of it, just a tiny part of it, below the heart, at the very centre, where, invisible to the human eye, the source of all life lies pulsating.

On the way home Kummernis asked God in her prayers to reverse the order of the roads and to wind up time like a ball of thread to stop it running at all. And when she realized that there was no escape for her anywhere on the outside, she understood that her only refuge was to journey to the inside, where dwells Our Lord. As soon as she crossed the threshold into herself, there she saw a much greater world, the beginning and end of which was God.

VII. After this journey Wilga fell ill and for several months she lay in a fever. It was thought she would die, and her betrothed, though sad, finally began to look for another bride. But gradually she felt better, and from then on Wolfram's sullen gaze watched over her return to health. His large, sinewy body, clad in leather and metal, tended to her body. His hand resting on his sword, which had cut off the heads of so many infidels, seemed ready for the next battle.

Then Wilga told her father: During my illness I saw things I had never dreamed of. I was in places that I had thought did not exist. Give me time, Father, to recover. I beg you to send me back to the convent, and in a year I shall return to marry Wolfram.

But her father was relentless and refused to hear of handing his daughter over to the nuns. For there she would become a thing apart, not brought under the plough like fallow land. In giving her to Wolfram von Pannewitz in marriage, in a manner he would be giving her to himself, that is to the male sex, to which through God's will he belonged, to possess and command the Lord's creation.

So he said to her: In body you belong to the world and you have no other lord and master than me. To this his daughter replied: I have another Father in heaven and He is preparing another Bridegroom for me.

At these words the baron flew into a rage and said: I am the lord and master of your life. He is the lord and master of your death.

Kummernis flees to the mountain wilderness, where she is tempted by the Devil

VIII. Realizing that her father's obduracy was stronger than all arguments, Kummernis ran away to the mountain wasteland; while wandering there she came across a stony mountain, and in it a cave, and by the cave a spring. She realized that God had given her this refuge, so that she might survive her father's rage and return to the convent. Having come to love this refuge, she lived in it for three years in solitude and prayer. She fed on mushrooms and forest roots; leaves served her for bedding and a rough stone for a pillow. And if anyone thinks this impossible, I call upon Jesus and the saints to bear witness, for I know of such cases when a person lives in solitude, sheltered and fed by the mountains.

At this time the Devil appeared to her, enraged by her holiness. He stood at the mouth of the cave and stared at her sneeringly. But she did not let him see that she had noticed him, and she prayed ceaselessly, until despite the cold and darkness in the cave, narcissi bloomed, surrounding her in white garlands. At this the Devil did not dare to go deeper into the cave, so he just stood on the spot and jeered at her. Another time he assumed a form that was half human and half horse, another time he took on the appearance of a man-serpent or a big black bird with human eyes. Seeing that she took no notice of him, he began to tempt her – he brought delicious food and put it at the mouth of the cave, and brightly coloured women's robes, and great volumes full of the wisdom of the world.

Kummernis heals the children of Konrad of Karlsberg

IX. These miracles were little praised and glorified, for they had no witnesses, but another event allowed people to hear of the saint.

One day Count Konrad of Karlsberg was crossing the mountains with his three children, but on the way they had eaten some dubious mushrooms, and the children fell seriously ill. They stopped at a village, and their mother began to mourn them. But on hearing that there was a hermit nun living in the mountains, ignoring his own dignity Konrad mounted his horse and rode up and down the forest paths in search of her. Having found her with the help of God he said to her: I beseech you, help my children, restore them to life. Kummernis refused, explaining that she never left her cave and that she was not worthy to heal the sick in the name of the Lord. But he threw himself at her feet and, bathing them in tears, would not stop imploring her to help. Kummernis went with him to the village and, having made the sign of the cross over the unconscious bodies of the children, she at once restored their health.

Thus the world heard about the saint, which was the cause of her fame, and then led to her martyrdom.

Kummernis cures sick souls and the suffering arising from desolation of heart

X. When people heard of the miracles she performed, they travelled towards the forest in crowds, to find the cave and ask for her help. There was a man possessed by the Devil, who changed into a wolf, howled at night and attacked people. When his family brought him to the saint, she leaned over him and spoke a few words in his ear. Those present heard how she addressed the Devil that inhabited the unfortunate man. They conversed for a while, and then suddenly the Devil left the sick man through his mouth, and was seen bolting into the forest in the shape of a wolf. The man recovered and lived in health and happiness to a ripe old age.

They also speak of a man who was a heavy drinker. The saint made the sign of the cross over him and prayed over him in silence,

and then, placing her hand beneath his breast, she drew out a hideous great bird that beat its wings awkwardly and flew away.

Sometimes people brought sick animals, but she never refused to cure them, just laid her hands on them and prayed for their health as if they were people.

Another time she helped a man who had been exiled from his city of birth, for he had broken the law there. This man could not live far from his home and was suffering a terrible yearning in his soul, so much so that he was incapable of doing anything. Kummernis laid her hands on his brow and from then on the man was cured, for she awoke in him love for all that he found in a foreign land, and he began to till the earth, sired many children and built houses.

She was also called to the dying, to accompany their souls through the labyrinths of death.

Kummernis reaches the convent to take her vows

XI. Miracle upon miracle did she perform, but it was not long before news of her reached her father, who had not yet forgotten his grudge. Warned by the Holy Spirit and escorted by Him, Kummernis reached her convent and there she took her vows. She spent her time alone in prayer, reading and strict fasting. Every Friday she slept, sitting in a chair, and the door of her cell was always open. The other nuns said that often from her cell a golden radiance fell and strange voices could be heard, as if Kummernis were holding a conversation with someone. Furtively, they would touch her robe when she came to mass.

Kummernis's father lays claim to her

XII. Unfortunately, all grudges, hatred and despair are long-lived. Kummernis's father was unable, in his spiritual confusion, to abandon his scheme. On discovering that she was at the convent, he

came for her in an agitated state, his face and hands visibly marked by the barely healed wounds of his latest battle. He told her: I have been at war in defence of the faith, while you have had much time to gather your strength before the holy sacrament of marriage, but now that time is over. Let us go home.

And she replied: I am no longer Wilga, I am not your daughter nor Wolfram's betrothed. My name is Kummernis and I have become the bride of Our Lord. At these words her father was overcome with such mighty anger that he seized the stool on which he was sitting and struck it against the wooden grille that divided him from his daughter. The grille crashed down, and he caught the girl by the arm and started to drag her after him. But she was young and strong, while he was old and jaded from eternal warfaring, so she tore herself free and fled from him.

He did not let his countenance betray him either to the abbess or to his servants, though he felt mortally humiliated. He stopped for the night at an inn not far from the convent and there, shut in a stuffy chamber, he slowly recovered his self-control.

XIII. The next day he returned to the convent with gifts and expensive robes, Wolfram's presents to his betrothed. He smiled broadly at her when she came into the parlour and said: Tell me, daughter, are there two classes of people, the ordinary and the perfect? And do you belong to the perfect, while I am just one of the ordinary? In what way are you different from other women who, obedient to the will of their fathers and to the will of God, get married and bear children for the glory of God? Why make life in a convent your ideal? For one can live a worthy and saintly life within marriage without being excluded from the opportunity of attaining perfection. Both ways are dear to God. And so why is your mind set on the way that creates so many complications, breaks hearts and destroys families? You are my only remaining daughter, my staff and comfort in old

age. For man by his nature is a peaceable being, seeking the company of others, not solitary and wild . . . What is more fitting to our nature than to enter into union with another, beloved person, to love him, to multiply and acquire land, as Our Lord has enjoined? Did not the Son of God tell us: 'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another'? And Kummernis replied: I already have a beloved husband for evermore and I am united with him. To this her father cried out: What? You have a husband without my consent?

Father, restrain your anger, your son-in-law is Jesus Christ, replied Kummernis.

Kummernis is basely kidnapped and imprisoned by her own father

XIV. The baron returned home crestfallen, but it was not melancholy that was poisoning his heart, not unrequited love, but anger and resentment that anyone should dare to oppose his will. So he incited Wolfram and together they committed a terrible sacrilege – by force of arms they attacked the convent where Kummernis was living, recaptured her, tied her to a horse and kidnapped her. Despite the fact that she begged and implored them, reminding them over and over that she no longer belonged to the world but to Jesus Christ, they ignored all her pleas, locked her up in a windowless room and left her alone for some time, so that her will would be crushed and her belief in marriage would return. Every day her father came to her and asked if she had changed her mind yet. And the longer and the more steadfastly she persisted, the greater was his rancour and hatred towards God. For nothing had come of the wars, his castle and property had fallen into chaos, and he no longer had a family. Therefore he kept her without food or drink, imagining that through hunger and thirst he would break her will. But for whole days on end

she lay prostrate on the flagstone floor and prayed, and no hint of hunger could touch her. Even Wolfram grew disheartened and started asking the baron to renounce his obduracy.

Sometimes Wolfram looked through his future wife's keyhole and he always saw her in the same position – lying with arms outstretched, face up towards the vault. Her eyes were fixed on a single point and remained motionless. And how beautiful she was.

Kummernis's prayers in imprisonment

XV. She remained without stirring and prayed: I have spurned the kingdom of the world and all its finery, but not out of fear of sin nor out of pious self-interest, only out of love of my Lord Jesus Christ, whom I saw and fell in love with, of whom I am enamoured for evermore. I sought Your countenance, O Lord, and in myself I found it, so that the world is no longer necessary to me. You provided me, O Lord, with my sex and my woman's body, which has been a bone of contention and a source of all manner of desire. Deliver me, O Lord, from this gift, for I do not know what I am to do with it. Take back my beauty and give me a sign of covenant that You love me too, unworthy as I am, and have destined me for Yourself since birth.

The miracle of Kummernis

XVI. I must bravely continue my account of the life of Saint Kummernis and approach the day of her death, though it will be hard for me to write about it, and even harder for you to believe.

As the baron and the knight Wolfram were waiting for some sort of change, the fear grew in them that they had presumed to alter something over which they had no influence. In order to dissolve this fear and for a while at least to forget about the imprisoned girl, they

went hunting and held feasts. In the mornings the horns rang out, and in the evenings music resounded.

During one of these feasts the baron said to Wolfram: If you were to go in there and take her by force, then she, who does not know the taste of love, would realize what she is giving up, and would throw herself into your arms. Do you think she is any different from these harlots who are willing to pull up their skirts at every demand?

Wolfram obediently stood up, staggered, but took himself in hand and set off straight for the door. The baron pushed away his harlot, ordered his beer to be poured and waited. But only a moment had passed when Wolfram came back again. His face was the picture of horror – he was opening and closing his mouth, and pointing behind him. The din in the hall fell completely silent. The baron sprang to his feet and rushed in the direction of Wolfram's pointing finger, and after him slipped the curious guests, servants and musicians.

XVII. In the windowless room stood Kummernis, but it was not the same woman that they all knew. Her face was covered with a silky beard and her hair fell flowing to her shoulders. From the tattered bodice of her dress there protruded two naked, girlish breasts. The gaze of her dark, but gentle eyes moved across the faces of the inquisitive onlookers and finally came to rest on the baron. The harlots began to make the sign of the cross and knelt down one after another. Kummernis, or whoever it was, raised her hands, as if to enfold them all to her breast. In a quiet voice she said: My Lord has delivered me from myself and has bestowed His face on me.

That same night the baron gave orders for the freak to be walled up in the room. Wolfram mounted his horse and, without taking his leave, departed.

The second coming of the Devil and his three temptations

XVIII. On the first night the Devil came to Kummernis in the form of an infant. When she stopped praying for a moment, she found a cradle by the wall, and in it a tiny child, whining helplessly.

Surprised to see the child, Kummernis interrupted her prayer, took it in her arms and nestled it to her breast. The devil burst out laughing in a gruff voice and said triumphantly: Now I've got you. But at once she replied: No, it is I that have got you. And nestled him yet more closely to her breast. The Devil tried to tear himself away, but he couldn't, so he decided to change his shape again. But the force radiating from the breast of the saint was so powerful that it stupefied the Devil and weakened him. He realized that he was contending with a being as powerful as he, maybe even more powerful because of her union with the Lord. Yet he did not renounce his resolve, but simply changed his approach.

You could love and be loved, he said.

I could, she replied.

You could bear a child in your womb, and then bring it into the world, he said.

Indeed I could, she said.

You could bathe it, feed it, swaddle it and caress it. You could watch it grow and become like you in body and soul. You could dedicate it to your God, and other children too, and He would be gratified.

So I could.

Look at me, said the Devil.

She clasped him more tightly to her breast. Tenderly she stroked his smooth skin. Then Kummernis drew forth her breast and set the Devil to it to suck. The Devil struggled and vanished just as he had appeared.

XIX. On the second day when she paused in prayer he appeared to her as a Bishop and delivered a speech of the kind that Bishops are

in the habit of making. He said to her: What are you trying to show them? That God has literally fulfilled your request and changed you into a monster? You should know him a little by now. He does not do such things.

They do not understand what has happened. They are ashamed of you and will forget you. They will curse you and laugh at you. This miracle will fill them with dread. They will not believe that it comes from Him. Miracles are meant to be beautiful and sublime, to spread sweet odours and to shine with heavenly radiance, to the sound of angelic music. But what have you become? A woman with a beard. Now you are only fit for the circus in the market-place.

Your obstinate sojourn here, in solitude, with an alien face instead of your beautiful countenance, is senseless. You are not Him. He has made a joke of you and is no longer concerned about you. He has forgotten you, He has gone to create new worlds. Do you really think you have a place in His thoughts? He has left you among the common rabble, who are just as likely to demand your sanctification as your burning at the stake.

No one will remember you. You are here in vain and your suffering is in vain. Are you trying to teach God about love? Do you expect Him to fall in love with your wretched person?

At these words Kummernis made the sign of the cross before the Bishop and replied: All of your strength is derived from doubt. May you one day come to know the mercy of faith.

At these words the Devil vanished.

XX. On the third day a holy crucifix appeared in Kummernis's cell, and on it the body of the Redeemer, but without a face. Then Kummernis's heart was flooded with grief and terrible guilt that He had deprived Himself of a face because of her. But Kummernis's soul was alert – where guilt appears, there He cannot be present. So she

realized that the Devil had come to her a third time, and she made the sign of the cross three times over the crucifix. The Devil knew that he had been recognized and began to tremble.

What do you want from me? he asked in terror, for it was a long time since anyone like this woman had walked in a human body.

She replied: Make your confession to me. Admit your sins to me.

The Devil cried out in despair: How can it be? Am I to make my confession to a human being?

But he could see that he had no other way out, so he began to speak, first resentfully, then with ever greater humility. And for three days and three nights he confessed his sins to her, finally begging the whole human race through her to grant him forgiveness for all manner of evil that he had done to it.

Kummernis told him: Are you not also a child of God, just as I am, just as all people are?

And as he answered her, she knew the mystery of God and released the barely living Devil from her embrace.

The martyrdom and death of Kummernis

XXI. In his confusion the baron started to drink even more, and when he came to, he found fresh flowers and lighted candles before the door of the walled-up room. He also found a huddle of women deep in prayer, who at once fled before him, in fear of his anger. This infuriated him even more.

In a booming voice he shouted at Kummernis: Who are you to oppose my will?

She replied: God is within me.

The baron was overcome with a rage greater than he had ever felt before. Neither as a newly born infant pushing his way into the world had he experienced it, nor even while massacring the armies of the infidels. This was a fury that could only have its source in

God or in the Devil. With a single kick he demolished the freshly built wall and found himself facing the creature that had evaded his will. Blinded by rage, he threw himself upon her, and shouting oaths, he stabbed her with a dagger. But even this was not enough for him, so he raised her body and nailed it crucified to the roof beams, crying out as he did so: If God is within you, then die like God.

Even after death he would not give her peace, and before she was laid in her grave he ordered the beard to be cut from her face, but it miraculously grew again.

After that, for the rest of his sinful life, he effaced the beard from images of the saint. But the memory of the saint survived and inspired much hope in people's hearts, spreading throughout the country and abroad, where she was given many names, for each land engenders new names.

Conclusion

XXII. All that is related here I took from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, from the works of Kummernis, as well as from the archives of the Benedictine convent at Kloster and from tales that I heard about her.

Whoever you are, as you read these words, I beseech you to remember the sinner Paschalis, monk, who – were God to grant him the opportunity to choose – would far more willingly choose the body of Kummernis, with all its suffering and merits, than the honours of any kingdom.

Tell this story to future generations, so that they may know that no evil can subjugate the human soul, and that a person united with Christ may die, but can never be defeated.

The wig-maker

Last year Marta showed me her wig-maker's chest. She keeps it under the window in the main room. It is lined with old newspapers, in which all the necessary equipment is also wrapped. She has ready-made wigs in there, on wooden heads stored in cellophane to prevent even the tiniest speck of dust from landing on them, and she also keeps skeins of unprocessed hair, waiting to be transformed into wigs.

She unwrapped the newspaper and showed them to me. 'Feel how soft and alive it is,' she said. 'Hair goes on living even after being cut off. It doesn't grow any more, of course, but it goes on living and breathing. It's like people whose bodies have stopped growing – that doesn't mean they're dead, does it?'

But I didn't dare touch it. I felt disgusted.

'Where did you get it from?' I asked, and she told me she'd had a hairdresser friend who had died and left her the most beautiful tresses from girls who had got bored with their mermaid hairstyles. He had picked them up from the floor for Marta, wrapped them in paper and kept them in the drawers of his hairdressing tables, to give her later as a present. Sometimes he had taken orders for Marta from women who had lost their hair because of illness or old age, or from men. Baldness affects them more often, though maybe less painfully. Marta said that a growing hair gathers a person's thoughts. It accumulates them in the form of indistinct particles, so that if you should want to forget something, or make a change or a new start, you should cut off your hair and bury it in the ground.

'What about a person who wears a wig made of someone else's hair?' I asked.

'It takes courage,' said Marta. 'They have to take on the thoughts of the person the hair came from. They have to be

ready for someone else's thoughts, and they must be strong and impervious by nature. And they have to be careful not to wear the wig all the time.'

Marta once used to make a lot of wigs, five or six a year, almost always to a specific order. She starts by matching the hair of the person placing the order – both its texture and colour, because dyeing is out of the question. She places the skeins of hair so that they lie in the same direction, then soaks them in soapy water to clean them. Once they're dry she rolls them up on her fingers and casts them on to a hackle, a wooden base with metal prongs used for disentangling. During the combing, some individual shorter hairs fall out, and she is left with a clean, shiny skein, as even in length as freshly mown grass. Then she uses the drawing brush, which consists of two little boards and a brush and holds the hair in place while the wig-maker weaves it. Then Marta pulls from the hackle a very, very fine strand, a few hairs thick, like the sort that sometimes falls in your eyes, and which you impatiently flick aside, and ties the strand on to the threads of a weaving frame. She demonstrated this to me. The hairs are attached with special knots, like macramé. Long strands have to be tied double or even treble. After that, Marta stretches these fringes out in her main room, so the hair won't get crumpled or broken. This is when the actual wig-making begins. Evenings are the perfect time for weaving threads of knotted hair into a fine piece of gauze. Marta does it with a crochet hook, exactly as if she were making a woolly cap. Her thin fingers with their pale nails work the threads nimbly through the tiny holes. She begins with a little circle that will eventually be at the very crown of the head, then adds more little holes, gathering them together so that a close-fitting, semi-circular shape begins to emerge beneath her fingers. For specific orders you have to be very accurate, so Marta keeps an exercise

book in which she notes down her measurements. She showed it to me. 'R.F. – 52, 54, 14' and a clumsy pencil drawing of a head with a high forehead, stained in several places with spilt milk or tears. Or: 'C.B. – 56, 53, 18' and a sketch of a wig with a centre parting and waves of lightly curled hair that would fall on to the shoulders. Or a hairpiece for someone with a receding hairline, an incomplete wig covering only the front of the head, but tied to the back underneath the remaining natural hair. Or a scalpette, that is, a toupee – a hairy pancake glued to the skin of the head, the envy of men who comb wisps of hair over their shiny bald patch and fear every mocking gust of wind that might spoil their artful arrangement.

Marta showed me several more wooden heads, polished to a shine by the fine gauze meshes. One of them was small, as if for a child, while another was so large that it was hard for me to believe that it matched anyone's head. For large wigs, apparently, there's rarely enough hair of a single kind and you have to blend hair, mixing skeins from many heads, selecting them precisely in terms of thickness and colour so that it will look natural.

Marta says that at one time all the women wanted to have partings, a straight pink mark dividing the hair, in line with the nose. To make a parting in a wig you have to add a very fine silk gauze, and pull individual hairs through its tiny eyelets, then tie them underneath, creating a minute mesh. It is extremely time-consuming, so Marta regards all partings as the height of refinement. When a friend who has an elaborate hairstyle with a parting visited us, I could see that Marta was looking at her head anxiously. She doesn't like dyed hair, especially bleached hair. She says that colouring stops the hair from being a storeroom for the thoughts. The dye ruins or distorts the hair, making it empty and artificial so that it can no longer fulfil its function.

Better to cut it off and throw it away at once – it's dead, without memory or purpose.

Marta never manages to finish telling me anything before we're interrupted by the need to deal with the water flowing down the hill, to steer it away from our houses so that it won't undermine the foundations, and to strengthen the edges of the pond before a flood in the night destroys them once and for all, or else to dry out our sopping shoes and trousers. Only once did she let me try on one of the wigs – it was dark and curly. I looked at myself in the mirror; my features seemed better defined, and I looked younger, but a stranger to myself.

'You don't look like you,' she said.

That was when it occurred to me to ask Marta for my own special wig. She would examine my face and record it in her wig-maker's memory. She would measure my head, immortalize it in her exercise book, add it to the other heads described in there, and then select hair of exactly the right colour and texture for me. I could have my own wig that would disguise and change me, that would give me a new face. But I didn't mention it to her. She put the wig away in a little bag of walnut leaves, which preserve hair.

The border

The Czech Republic borders our land and is visible from our house. In summer we can hear dogs barking and cocks crowing from that direction. On August nights we can hear the Czech combine harvesters roaring away, and on Saturdays the sound of a disco that's held in Sonov. The border is very old, and it has divided one state from another for centuries, without undergoing much change. The trees have got used to being on the

border, as have the animals. But while the trees have come to terms with their location and have never stepped out of place, the foolish animals have no respect for the boundary. Each winter herds of deer sweep grandly southwards across it. The fox goes to and fro twice a day – just after sunrise he appears on the hillside, then goes back after five when everyone is watching the news. You could set your watch by the fox's comings and goings. We have often wandered across the border too, in search of mushrooms, or out of laziness, because we don't feel like cycling all the way to Tłumaczów, where there's an official border post. We can carry our bikes on our backs and soon be on the other side. The forest road that runs across the border near our house has been ploughed up to make it impassable to cars, but re-emerges a few metres further down. We've got used to being watched day and night by the border guards – the lights of their night patrols, the thunder of their Mercedes, and the rumble of their motorbikes; dozens of men in uniform guard the weed-choked strip of land where raspberries grow large and fragrant with no fear of being uprooted. It would be easier for us to believe they're guarding the raspberries.

The comet

Quite out of the blue a bizarre and compelling idea came into my head today: that we have ended up as human beings through forgetfulness, through lack of attention, and that in reality we are creatures participating in a vast, cosmic battle that has probably been going on since time immemorial, and which, for all we know, may never end. All we see of it are glimmers, in blood-red moons, in fires and gales, in frozen leaves that fall in October, in the jittery flight of a butterfly, in the irregular pulse of time that

can lengthen a night into infinity or come to a violent stop each day at noon. I am actually an angel or a demon sent into the turmoil of one life on a sort of mission, which is either carrying itself out without my help, or else I have totally forgotten about it. This forgetfulness is part of the war – it's the other side's weapon, and they've attacked me with it so that I'm wounded, invalided out of the game for a while. As a result, I don't know how powerful or how weak I am – I don't know anything about myself because I can't remember anything, and that's why I don't try to look for either weakness or power in myself. It's an extraordinary feeling – to imagine that somewhere deep inside, you are someone completely different from the person you always thought you were. But it didn't make me feel anxious, just relieved, finally free of a kind of weariness that used to permeate my life.

After a while this powerful feeling faded completely, blotted out by concrete images: the door open to the hall, the dogs sleeping, the workmen who arrived at dawn and are putting up a stone wall.

In the evening R. went to town, and I went to see Marta. Over the mountain pass hung a comet – falling without moving, a frozen, alien light in the sky. Marta and I sat at the table. She was combing hair for wigs, laying out some very fine multicoloured strands on the oilcloth. She covered the entire surface of the table with them, while I read the life of the saint to her. I didn't think she was listening properly; she kept rummaging in drawers and rustling the newspapers in which she keeps her hair collection. Spring flies and moths had already discovered the light bulbs; their winged shadows, enormously magnified, were jumbled on the kitchen walls. At the end of the story Marta had just one question: who was the person who wrote the life of the saint, and how did he know it all?

That night R. came back. As he unpacked the shopping from the plastic bags he said that people in town were going out on to their balconies to look at the comet through binoculars.

Who wrote the life of the saint and how he knew it all

You could say he was born imperfect, because for as long as he could remember he felt there was something wrong with him, as if he had made a mistake at birth, choosing the wrong body, the wrong place and the wrong time.

He had five younger brothers and one older. After their father's death the older brother took on the task of managing the farm. Johann both hated and admired him. He hated him for the stubborn and severe way in which he ran the farm, where everything had to be done on time and each person had his own permanent duties that had to be performed like a ritual. Even prayers. Johann liked to pray, because it was the only moment when he could be entirely alone with himself, but even then his older brother would prod him and say, 'That's enough. Prayer time's over now. The sheep are waiting.' He admired his brother for the same reasons – thanks to him everyone had something to eat.

But one year a harsh winter set in early and they failed to gather in the last of the hay in time, and the fruit froze on the trees. It was clear that Johann was the one who should go to the monastery.

That was how he ended up as a monk at Rosenthal, among young and old men, but his new life wasn't very different from the one he had led at home. Here he worked in the kitchen and the garden, chopped firewood, washed the dishes and fed swill

to the pigs. From October to April he felt cold all the time, so he huddled by the kitchen stove until his brown habit grew warm and gave off the smell of burnt wool. In spring he was assigned to the garden, under the care of Brother Michael, who taught him the names of the herbs and instilled in him a fondness for all that grows, sprouts leaves, blossoms and bears fruit. 'You have green fingers, my boy. Look how your basil is growing. We've never had such a fine specimen before.' Gradually Johann, who was now called Paschalis, noticed that his habit was becoming infused with the aromas of thyme, hyssop, fennel and mint.

But despite his changes of name, clothing and smell, Paschalis continued to feel ill at ease. He would have preferred to be someone else, somewhere else. He still didn't know who or where, but often, instead of praying, he would kneel down with his hands folded and gaze at the icons in the chapel, especially the one showing the Virgin Mary holding the Holy Infant, with two women standing beside her – Saint Catherine with her book and Saint Apollonia with her tongs. And whenever he gazed at it he imagined he was in the picture too, at the very centre of the scene. Behind him lay an open plain, crowned on the horizon by snow-capped mountain peaks. Nearby there was a city with a massive tower and walls of red brick. Well-trodden paths led from all directions to the gates of the city. Beside him, close enough to touch, sat the Virgin Mary and the Holy Infant; the Redeemer's smooth, white legs were resting on her purple gown. In the air above her hovered two angels, their wings outspread like huge dragonflies. Paschalis was either Saint Catherine or Saint Apollonia – he could never make up his mind for long, but in any case he was one or other of them. He had long hair that flowed down his back. His dress hugged his rounded breasts and flowed to the ground in gentle folds. His naked feet could feel the soft caress of the material. At this point he would be

seized by rapture, and he would close his eyes and forget he was kneeling on the cold chapel floor in his old brown habit.

Brother Paschalis had a beautiful face – his closely cropped hair only accentuated its beauty. His striking, dark eyes gazed from beneath his long eyelashes. His smooth, clear skin was still beardless, and his teeth were brilliantly white. As he knelt there in the chapel, with his eyes fixed on the icon of the Virgin Mary, he looked unbearably lovely.

That was how Brother Celestyn – the bursar, who guaranteed material comforts for the brotherhood alongside their spiritual life – first saw him. Brother Celestyn called Paschalis over to him and said simply, 'I like you. You have a true vocation for the monastic life, and that is rare in our turbulent, heretical times. Perhaps one day you will become an abbot. But for now I shall take care of you.'

So Paschalis became his new assistant, the third or fourth in succession. He brought the lamps into the dormitory, hung up the towels and was in charge of the razors. The next winter Paschalis started learning to read and taking care of the lamps in the scriptorium. Brother Celestyn himself checked his reading progress, and told him to come to his cell after nones to read some set texts. As he listened, he paced the cell from wall to wall, or stood facing the window. Paschalis could see his solid shoulders and his heels clad in woollen stockings. 'You read better and better,' said his superior, coming over to him and casually stroking the clean-shaven nape of his neck with his thumb. Paschalis did not find this caress unpleasant. Finally, during one of the reading sessions Celestyn came up to him and slipped a hand beneath his habit. 'Your back is as a smooth as a girl's. You have grown into a handsome youth.' Paschalis soon found himself naked in Celestyn's bed, where beneath the woollen blanket were sheets so soft they put the skin to shame.

In this silken bedding he allowed Brother Celestyn to do as he wished with his body. It was neither enjoyable nor unenjoyable.

From then on Paschalis's habit no longer smelled of herbs, but of dust, books, and the strange, pungent odour of another male body.

Once, as they lay beside each other, drowsy from making love, Paschalis confided in Celestyn that he would like to be someone else. 'What would it be like if I were a woman . . .?' he wondered in the darkness. He also told him about the dress clinging to the body of Saint Catherine and falling in folds to the ground. 'We should regard being a woman as a kind of deformity, although this deformity is a part of the natural order,' replied Celestyn in the words of the Areopagite and closed his eyes, as if wanting to shield himself from all such infallible statements.

One day Paschalis asked the wise Brother Celestyn about sin. 'Tell me, is this a mortal sin? Surely we're not only breaking our vows of chastity, but also the laws of nature . . .' 'What would you know about nature?' said Celestyn angrily and sat up in bed, lowering his bare feet to the cold stone floor. His back was speckled with red pimples. He started to pull on his habit. Paschalis suddenly felt cold in the empty bed, without Celestyn's body to keep him warm. 'All the great philosophers and fathers of the Church have said that woman is the source of all evil. It was because of her that Adam committed the original sin, and because of her Our Lord died on the cross. She was created for temptation, but foolish are those who succumb to her. Remember that the body of a woman is a sack of dung and each month nature herself reminds us of this by staining her with unclean blood.' Celestyn turned the leaves of the book from which Paschalis had been reading aloud. 'Come here and read,' he said. Paschalis stood shivering over the book. 'In the order of

old it was said that the pit should always be covered; and if an animal were to fall into the open pit, the man who had left that pit open would incur punishment. These terrible words apply to a woman, who shows herself to the eyes of a man, leading him into temptation. The pit is her pretty face, her white neck and sparkling eyes. The woman is guilty of the man's sin and must pay for that sin on the Day of Judgement.' 'Get dressed,' said Celestyn, seeing his lover's trembling body. 'Our sin is merely a minor carnal sin, not worth a mention at confession. It is a lesser evil than intercourse with a woman.'

Yet Brother Celestyn wasn't paying proper attention and had misunderstood Paschalis. Paschalis wasn't interested in intercourse with a woman – he didn't want to have a woman, but to *be* a woman – to have breasts and to be aware of them with every movement. Those soft, warm spheres would fully make up for the lack of that thing between his legs. To feel the hair tumbling down your back, smell the sweet scent of your own soft skin, hear the jingle of your earrings, smooth out the folds of your dress and hold a fine handkerchief to your bosom. 'You're so beautiful. I cannot get my fill of you,' said Celestyn suddenly into his ear. 'And now let us pray.' They kneeled beside each other on the stone floor and began to mutter their prayers.

Because in a monastery there is not much difference between the past and the future, because not much changes over time and in everyday life, except perhaps for the colours of the seasons, the monks live in a constant present. Here, a period of time that in the outside world would seem just a fleeting moment, has no beginning and no end. And if it weren't for the wisdom of the human body, which never loses sight of its final goal, life in the monastery would have been immortal.

Paschalis was surrounded on all sides by a sequence of meticulous rituals, calculated down to the very last gesture, the

very last instant. Even the dogs that he watched from the windows took part in the routine of monastery life. They would appear at noon by the rubbish heap, where the leftovers were thrown, and feed voraciously. Then they would disappear for a while, only to come back and rummage eagerly through the next load of refuse. They spent the evenings either establishing their hierarchy, by biting each other and whining, or holding their doggy frolics. In the winter they huddled up against the barns and byres. In spring you could hear their envious yapping as they divided up the bitches between them. In summer pathetically helpless puppies would appear in all corners, and in autumn they formed packs and started hunting small rodents.

Like all the monks, Paschalis got up at dawn, washed his face and put on his habit. Then he went straight into the gentle rhythm of prayer and work, into the whispering throng of dark figures shuffling to and fro along walkways and cloisters.

Brother Celestyn was father, lover and friend to him. He taught him many things. One day he gave him a rare privilege – he got him a place on the monthly expedition to deliver fresh meat to the associated convent. It was a great gift for Paschalis to see a landscape so vast that the monastery cloisters and labyrinths seemed sick and stunted in comparison. They would leave before dawn to reach the kitchen gate of the convent at around noon. The cart rolled slowly uphill, and when it reached the pass, even the oxen stopped and stared at the incredibly distant horizon separating the sky from the green valley, and the massive mountains that looked like a row of tables. For some reason, at this point Paschalis was always seized by anxiety. Further along the way they passed a single small village, just a few clay huts, and that was the only moment when he used to feel homesick.

As soon as the cart stopped before the gate, a bell rang out. The cart drove into the yard and the brothers set about unloading sides of pork. Each month Paschalis looked around impatiently for any female figure at all, but usually he only saw the older nuns, who had missing teeth and wrinkled faces. They reminded him of his mother. Afterwards they would invite the monks into the kitchen and treat them to a meal. The kitchen was clean and cosy, and smelled of honey and cheese. The nuns had an apiary and kept cows. In exchange for the meat the monks were given pots of honey and baskets of cheeses wrapped in clean rags. Paschalis suspected that a woman's body must smell like that: of cheese and honey – a combination both pleasant and nauseating.

Sometimes Paschalis succeeded in seeing more. Once from the cart he saw some nuns over the wall, among their garden plots. They were weeding the vegetables and started throwing clumps of weeds at one another, smothering their squeals of laughter by pressing the broad sleeves of their habits against their mouths. This childlike behaviour startled him. Then one of them hitched up her skirt and leaped across the vegetable patches, without hitting the clusters of plants. Her veil fluttered in the wind like hair, or as if wings had miraculously sprouted from her head. Afterwards Paschalis tried to copy their movements – soft, always flowing and beautiful.

After this sort of incident he always felt reluctant to return to the monastery, and even to Brother Celestyn. Everything there was angular somehow, awkward and crude, including the older monk. Yes, Celestyn's body could give Paschalis pleasure – he had learned that by now – but it was not the answer to Paschalis's dreams. Lying beside him in bed he would fantasize that Celestyn was a woman. He would slide his fingers down his lover's back, until eventually he felt rough, hairy buttocks, and

withdrew his hand in disappointment. But soon he began to imagine that he himself was a woman, and then Celestyn could remain who he was. The very idea of having a woman's body, with that secret hole between your legs, made him shudder with pleasure until it became an obsession. He wondered what such a thing might look like – whether it was a hole like an ear or nostril, but larger, round and smooth, or maybe like a sort of split, a continually bleeding wound, like a cut that never heals. Paschalis would have given the world to know this sinful secret, but not in the usual way, from the outside – he wanted to live it, to experience it for himself.

The next winter Celestyn caught a chill, and once it was clear that nothing could possibly help him, the brothers gathered in his cell and began to recite the three-part prayer for the dying. Celestyn knew what this meant, and he cast his feverish gaze across the faces of the brothers, as if seeking their reassurance that what awaited him would resemble the order of monastery life. Then there was a rap at the door and all the monks assembled to hear his last confession. Paschalis cried as the abbot intoned the *Credo in unum Deum*. The tears went on pouring down his face as Celestyn made his fitful confession and failed to mention the sin they had committed together for months on end. The abbot gave the dying man absolution and his body was laid on the stone floor. In the evening he died.

The abbot must have noticed the young monk's despair because he suggested releasing him from the duty of the next day's meat delivery expedition. But Paschalis didn't want to be let off the trip. His skin, brain and heart were burning as if he had fallen into the flames of a living hell.

The delivery wagon set off in the dark. The wooden cartwheels creaked steadily and the freezing breath of the oxen rose above their muzzles in a bright cloud. The sun came up over a

low winter sky and the pass opened before them, revealing nothing but misty white air – neither the Glatz valley nor the Table Mountains were visible. Before they reached their destination, Paschalis was running a temperature, vomiting and shaking with fever. The cart moved slowly as the oxen struggled to wade through the snow. There was no sense in taking the sick man on the return journey, so the brothers left him at the convent, to the dismay of the sisters, and promised to come back for him once he was better. Outside a blizzard was raging.

Paschalis forgot where he was. He thought he was being carried into a damp, murky vault, and suddenly he realized that they wanted to lay him beside the dead body of Celestyn, to bury them together in the same grave. He tried to break free, but he had the impression of being tied or, more likely, tangled in his own habit, which had suddenly become heavy and stiff as a coffin lid. Later he saw two terrible sorceresses leaning over him. They seized him by the head and poured some hot, odious liquid into his mouth. One of them led him to understand that he was drinking Celestyn's urine, and Paschalis grew rigid with shock. 'I'm poisoned, I'm poisoned!' he shouted, but his voice echoed strangely off the bare walls.

Suddenly he awoke in a small room with a high, narrow window. His bladder was full, so he sat up on the pallet and lowered his feet to the floor. He felt the soft, warm touch of sheepskin underfoot, and all at once his head began to spin. He stood up cautiously and glanced under the bed in search of a chamber pot, but there was nothing in the room apart from the bed, a prayer stool and the bedside rug. He wrapped himself in the bedspread and peeped outside. He saw a broad corridor with windows on one side that looked straight on to sheer cliffs, and only then did he realize where he was. A squat clay vessel stood by the door. He hauled it into the room and relieved himself, and went back to bed

feeling happy. The air here was warmer, and smelled completely different. His feet revelled in the touch of the sheepskin.

In the evening the prioress came to see him. She was the same age as his mother. Fine lines radiated from her mouth, and her dry, wrinkled skin was the colour of ash. She took him by the hand and measured his pulse. 'I'm so weak that I can't stand up,' Paschalis assured her in a whisper. She looked him closely in the eye. 'How old are you, boy?' she asked. 'Seventeen,' he said, clinging on to her hand. 'Please would you let me recover here, Sister?' he asked and kissed her hot, dry hand. She gave a faint smile and stroked his shaven head.

Next day the two old crones whom he remembered from his feverish hallucinations summoned him to the kitchen. A wooden washtub stood steaming full of hot water. 'You'll have a bath so you don't bring us any lice,' said the older nun, who had drooping cheeks like empty purses. She spoke softly, like a child – perhaps she had no teeth, or maybe she came from the south. They washed him with their heads averted, scrubbing his small body just as his mother used to – single-mindedly, but gently, until his skin glowed red. He was given a long linen shirt of the kind worn by the nuns, and leather boots for his legs. Without a word the nuns escorted him back to the room where he had lain sick for the past two weeks.

From then on the prioress came to see him every day. She would stand over him and gaze at him intently. He couldn't bear this searching gaze. He was sure she knew all about his lying and pretending. He would turn his face to the wall and wait. Once she had checked his pulse they would kneel together to say the Hail Mary and the prayer for the sick. When she left, he would close his eyes and try to catch her scent in the air. But the prioress had no scent. He found her beautiful – she was tall and fine-figured, strong and healthy looking, and had a gap between

her front teeth. One evening she came and told him from the doorway to get ready for the return journey. She had already turned and placed her hand on the door handle when Paschalis threw himself down before her, caught hold of her habit and pressed his lips to her stockinged feet. 'Don't send me back there, Mother,' he cried in a shrill voice. She stood still, and only now could he smell her scent – of dust, smoke and flour. He clung to that scent, ready for anything. After a long while she leaned over him and raised him from his knees.

He told her everything, even about Celestyn. He told her about his body, that didn't want to be the way it was. Finally he burst into tears, which ran down his face and soaked his linen shirt. 'It is hard to comprehend all of God's works,' she said, sighing, and looking at him with a strange glint in her eye. The boy could not control his sobbing. The prioress left the room.

'One thing I know. You can't stay here,' she told him at dawn, when without warning she entered his cell straight after prayers. 'You are not a woman, you have the physical traits of your sex . . . although they can be hidden. As a man you are dangerous and undesirable here.' Torn from sleep, Paschalis had difficulty in following what she was saying. 'But I prayed to the Holy Virgin and she sent Kummernis to me.' In a whisper Paschalis repeated the name. He couldn't understand what it meant. She told him to get up. He let her throw a cloak over his shirt and followed her down the corridors, from narrow into wider ones, which twisted and turned, becoming cloisters and staircases, until at last they stopped at the door of a small chapel built on to the stone wall of an empty room. The prioress genuflected, and Paschalis automatically repeated the gesture. They went into a smallish space illuminated by a little oil lamp close to the floor. The prioress used its flame to light the candles. Gradually, his eyes took in the sight before them.

The entire altar was a large oil painting of a cross with a body crucified upon it. Something about it made Paschalis feel uneasy, and at the same time there seemed to him something very familiar in the scene – the folds of the dress, falling softly to the ground. He couldn't tear his gaze from the two smooth, white female breasts that, exposed by the figure's outstretched arms, seemed to him the central point of the painting. But there was something even more bizarre, something impossible to accept, and Paschalis began to tremble – the female body on the cross was crowned with the face of Christ, the face of a man with a youthful, reddish growth of beard.

Though Paschalis couldn't understand what he was seeing, he instinctively sank to his knees. His teeth were chattering, not because of the early morning chill, but from the apprehension that he was kneeling before a creature like himself, similar to him in some way, although it was patently unnatural. The eyes of Christ gazed at him meekly and with a sadness that could only be the flip side of love. There was neither torment nor pain in them.

He turned to the prioress. She was smiling.

'This is Kummernis. We also call her Holy Care, and she has many other names.'

'It's a woman,' said Paschalis quietly.

'She isn't a saint yet, but we believe that one day she'll be canonized. So far Pope Clement has blessed her. She lived over two centuries ago not far from here, in Broumov. She was virtuous and beautiful. All the men vied for her hand, but she chose Our Lord as her only husband. Her father tried to force her to marry by imprisoning her, and then a true miracle occurred. The Lord Jesus, wanting to protect her from the loss of her virginity and to reward her constancy, gave her His face.' The prioress genuflected slowly. 'Her enraged father crucified her, so

she died a martyr's death, just like her Betrothed. We chose Kummernis as the patron saint of our order, but the present Pope has banned her cult, so we keep her shut up in here. We believe the Pope will change his decision. But come on now, or you'll freeze.'

On the way back she asked him if he could keep a secret. He said yes eagerly. 'And can you read and write?'

Hens and cockerels

Every spring Marta goes down to Nowa Ruda and buys herself two hens and a cockerel. She then looks after those chickens, tending to their mindless existence, which boils down to hour after hour spent walking round their enclosure with their attention equally divided between the earth below, where there might be grain, and the sky above, where there might be a hawk. In the world of the chicken, there is life beneath their feet, and death above their heads. In the evenings Marta ushers all three of them into the henhouse, and in the morning she lets them out again. She brings them potatoes boiled to a pulp and mixed with bran in an old cake tin. The chickens are little bother, and she gets two eggs a day for her pains. Sometimes she brings me an old sugar bag full of eggs, their shells stained with chicken droppings. Their yolks are intensely yellow; just looking at such a perfect replica of the sun is enough to make you squint. Each autumn, Marta kills her chicken family with her own hands in one day.

I have never understood this; the first year I didn't speak to her for several days afterwards and I threw away the bones she brought for my dogs. I thought an evil demon must have got into her – she bought no meat all summer and ate only vegetables.

Her chickens were tame, they weren't afraid of people, they would eat cake crumbs from your hand and look you in the eye. For three days in a row Marta made broth out of them, after roasting the meat and gnawing the bones right down to the last sinew. I found it hard to believe that this skinny old woman had eaten three whole chickens in the course of three days.

She was here at my window a minute ago. 'I've bought some hens,' she said.

'I see,' I muttered.

'What are you doing?' she asked, trying to make peace.

'I'm busy.'

For a while she was silent. I pressed 'Save'.

'That's taking a long time,' she said. I could hear her walking round to the terrace; any minute now she'd come up the steps. I could hear her wiping her shoes very carefully. A moment later I could see her sitting at the round table in the hall. She was wearing an absurd baseball cap and smiling.

'Isn't that a waste of time?' she said, and then showed me the young hens and the cockerel in her basket.

I suspect that Marta has trouble sleeping; maybe that's why she keeps quiet about her dreams. She told me that her entire night's sleep consists of a two-hour nap in the evening, as if her body doesn't feel tired and only reacts to darkness out of habit. After that she wakes up, fully rested, lights the lamp in the kitchen, or at least a candle, and stares into its flame. And sometimes, when the night is clear, she sits in the dark and watches the moon from her kitchen window. It never looks quite the same, she told me. It's always different, rising in a different spot and taking different routes round the tops of the spruce trees. On clear nights Marta likes to go out into the road, cross it near the wayside shrine and then go into the mountain pass, below

the Olbrichts' windmill, which is now nothing but a heap of stones and a well. From there she can see the silver-edged mountains and valleys in the distance, dotted with the lights of houses. Over Nowa Ruda and distant Kłodzko hangs a yellow glow, most visible when the sky is clouded over. The towns are shining, as if appealing for help.

But the most astounding thing Marta sees is the sleep of the thousands of people who lie side by side, plunged in experimental death, in towns and villages, along highways, at border crossings, in mountain shelters, hospitals and orphanages, in Kłodzko and Nowa Ruda, and further afield, over an area that you can't see or even get a sense of. Amid their own familiar smell or in strange beds – the bunks in workers' hostels, or the divan beds in cluttered bachelor flats – behind the partitions separating sleeping space from living space, in each house lie warm, inert bodies with their arms spread wide, or huddled together, with flickering eyelids, beneath which their eyes dart restlessly. She hears the music of breathing and snoring and strange words blurted out, sees the involuntary dance of feet, the movements of bodies roaming far from their duvets. Meanwhile their minds see images, but they aren't in control of themselves, those millions of people – half of humanity – who are asleep at any moment in time, while the other half is awake. While some are waking up, others are lying down, thus keeping the world in balance. One night without sleep and people's thoughts would start to smoulder, the letters in the world's newspapers would get muddled up, speech would make no sense and people would try to push it back into their mouths. Marta knows that no moment on earth can be bright and intense without being balanced on the other side of the planet by a dark, dull moment.

Dreams

When dreams repeat events from the past, when they turn them into images, churn them up and sift them through a web of meanings, I start to fear that the past, just like the future, will remain obscure and inscrutable for ever. The fact that I have experienced something doesn't mean I have understood it. Supposing it turned out that something I thought I knew about and had always regarded as fixed and certain may have happened for a completely different reason and in a way I had never suspected. That it had led me to the wrong conclusion, and I had failed to go in the right direction, because I was blind, or asleep. If that might be true of my past, what hope is there for my present?

The group of people I joined on the Internet have shown me that nothing connects us in the same way as dreams. We all dream the same things in a peculiarly similar, muddled way. These dreams are both our personal property, and everyone else's. That's why dreams have no authors, that's why we're so willing to record them on the Internet in all sorts of languages, signing them with just an initial, a first name or a symbol. All over the world, wherever people are sleeping, small, jumbled worlds are flaring up in their heads, growing over reality like scar tissue. There might be experts who know what each of them means individually, but no one knows what they all mean collectively.

A dream from the Internet

I'm in a gloomy, old town, full of narrow tenements. I'm investigating a peculiar phenomenon, namely that there are round

holes in the walls of the houses and no one knows how they got there. I'm studying the holes in walls, wire netting, fences and window-panes, and I discover that they are clearly aligned – it's as if there's a tunnel through the objects, as if something flew along making holes in whatever came into its path. But I don't try to establish what it was. I'm simply fascinated by the trajectory of its flight. At first it looks to me as if this thing flew down from the sky, went close to the ground and flew back up into the sky again. But the evidence is indisputable – it must actually have flown out from underground and disappeared into the sky. The objects aren't particularly bothered by the fact that they're full of holes.

Things forgotten

I went to Marta's and hacked down the nettles along the path to the stream for her. She came toddling after me with her arms folded, saying that there were all sorts of creatures God had forgotten to create.

'The wodger, for instance,' I said. 'It would have had a hard shell like a tortoise, but with long legs and strong, crushing teeth. It would have gone along the stream gobbling up all the dirt, slime and dead branches, even the rubbish that the water brings down from the village.'

We began to think up all the animals that God for some reason or other had never created. There were so many birds and animals that He had left out. Finally Marta said what she missed most was that large, sluggish creature that sits at the crossroads at night. She didn't say what it was called.

The Germans

Early this summer the Germans began to appear in the meadows. Their grizzled heads came floating by on a sea of grass, and their wire glasses glittered gaily in the sunshine. Whatsisname said that you can recognize Germans by their shoes, which are clean and white. We don't take care of our shoes, they're scruffy and always made of dark material, or else we wear gumboots, rubber farm boots. Our shoes are made of imitation leather, garish black-and-white counterfeits of popular brands. They're permanently muddy because of the soggy, red earth, and misshapen from being repeatedly soaked and dried out again.

Every year the Germans come pouring out of coaches that park timidly on the hard shoulder, as if trying to be inconspicuous. They walk about in small groups or pairs, most often pairs, a man and a woman, as if looking for a spot to make love. They take photos of empty spaces, which many people find puzzling. Why don't they take pictures of the new bus stop or the new church roof, instead of empty spaces overgrown with grass? We have often treated them to tea and cakes. They never sit down or ask for more. They just finish their tea and are off. We feel embarrassed if they try to press a few marks into our hands. We're afraid we must look like savages, living as we do among eternal repairs, with flaking plaster on the walls and the rotten step on the terrace stairs.

Wherever the Germans go, they always end up at the shop, where small children are waiting for them, holding out their hands for sweets. Some of them resent this and there's always some unpleasantness. During those few minutes when the Germans are handing out sweets, a patriotic feeling fills the air and everything goes red and white, as if the national flag, worn

thin as gauze, were floating on high, and, despite the sweets, we're actually aware of being Poles.

Some of the Germans come again and again. Some of them have even invited people from the village to the Reich (only one or two, mainly those who take care of the German graves) and arranged jobs for them.

One year an old couple turned up on our land and showed us where houses that no longer existed had stood. Afterwards we sent each other Christmas cards. They reassured us that the Frost family was no longer interested in our house.

'Why should anyone be interested in our house?' I asked Marta resentfully.

'Because they built it,' she replied.

One evening, as we were clearing the empty teacups and plates from the terrace, Marta said that the most important human duty is to save things that are falling into decay, rather than create new ones.

Peter Dieter

As Peter Dieter and his wife Erika crossed the border, a ladybird landed on Peter's hand. He inspected it closely and found that it had seven spots. He was pleased.

'That's a sign of welcome,' he said.

They drove along a strange stretch of motorway, with girls in short, tight little skirts standing on either side of it waving at the cars.

In the evening they reached Wrocław, and Peter was amazed to find that he recognized the place – except that it all seemed darker and smaller, as if they were on the inside of a shabby photograph. At the hotel he had to take his pills before bed, because

his heartbeat felt irregular, as though the space between each beat were going to last for ever.

'We've come here too late,' said Erika solemnly and sat down on the bed. 'We're too old for excitement. Look how swollen my legs are.'

Next day they looked round Wrocław: it was the same as all the other cities they had seen in their lives. Cities in decline, cities on the up, cities sloping down towards rivers, cities with deep foundations and cities built on sand, fragile as cobwebs. Ruined, deserted cities and cities rebuilt on top of cemeteries, where people live as if they were dead. Cities divided in half, balancing on a single bridge, like a stone fulcrum.

Then they reached the mountains. First came Karpacz, which was full of souvenir kiosks, then Szklarska Poręba, which Peter insisted on calling Schreiberhau, as if afraid to tackle the new Polish name. But in fact all they could think of was finally getting to Neurode and Glatz, and whether they would manage to see everything.

Peter wanted to see his village again, and Erika wanted to see Peter looking at it. She thought it would finally help her to understand him fully, from start to finish, with all his sadnesses, laconic answers to her questions, and sudden changes of mood that so worried her – or even those stubborn games of patience, all the time he wasted on that sort of nonsense, his dangerous way of overtaking on the motorway, and all the other strange things about him that forty years of married life had done nothing to change.

They stopped at a country inn where all the signs of welcome, warning and information were in German. Before breakfast Peter was up and about in front of the house. It was May, and the sow thistles were in bloom much later than on the plains. He could see his mountains, like mist-wreathed, liquid

lines on the horizon. He sniffed the air. The smell, rather than the view, released an avalanche of images, like an over-exposed film, torn and out of focus, with no sound, point or plot.

They set off after a breakfast of soft-boiled eggs. At first the road led downhill, then gently up, twisting and turning until they had entirely lost their sense of direction. They passed villages sprawled along the slopes, large and small houses, and some mysterious streams that were actually all the same little river. Each village had its own valley, and lay there like chocolates in the velvety hollows.

The worst moment that day was when Peter didn't recognize his own village. It had shrunk to the size of a hamlet, with houses, backyards, lanes and bridges missing. Only a skeleton of the original village remained. They left the car in front of a padlocked church, behind which Peter's home had once stood among the lime trees.

He sniffed around the place, and again that strange film of the past started playing in his head. He found that he could set it off anywhere – in the bar by the petrol station, in the underground, on holiday in Spain or at the shopping centre. Maybe elsewhere the adored film would be clearer, because it wouldn't be interrupted by the scenes before his eyes.

They wandered along a narrow, well-trodden path and looked down from the hilltop at the skeleton village, with its few remaining houses, tiny little gardens and tremendous lime trees. The whole scene was full of life – people were walking along driving cows, dogs were running about, a man burst into sudden laughter, a car tooted its horn, higher up a man with a bucket waved to them, smoke from the chimneys drifted into the sky, and birds flew blithely westwards.

They sat down on the grass by the roadside and ate some crisps. Erika peeped at his face, afraid his eyes might be damp or

his chin shuddering, in which case she would have put down her bag of crisps and embraced him. But he looked as if he were watching television.

'You go on alone,' she said, then, 'Look how swollen my legs are,' which was beginning to sound like a refrain. He didn't answer.

'We've come too late. I'm old and I haven't the strength to go on up the hill. I'm going back to the car. I'll wait for you there.'

She stroked his hand gently and turned away. She caught his final remark, 'Give me two, three hours maybe.' She felt sad

Peter Dieter walked at snail's pace, staring at the stones and the wild rose bushes, already in bud. Every few dozen metres he stopped and caught his breath while he looked at the leaves and plants, and the slender-stalked fungi that were slowly eating away at the fallen trees.

The road went through fallow land, then into a spruce forest. When the forest came to an end, Peter finally caught sight of the mountain panorama that he had carried inside him all this time. On the way up he only looked round behind him once, because he was afraid of ruining the view by staring at it, like valuable stamps that lose their shape and colour if you look at them too often. But once he was on the crest he stopped and turned right round, savouring the scenery and drinking it in. He had seen mountains the world over, and had always compared them with these, but none had ever seemed as beautiful. They were either too big and imposing, or too modest, too wild, dark and forested like the Schwarzwald, or too bright and domesticated like the Pyrenees. He got out his camera and used it to pin down the view. Snap – the scattered village buildings. Snap – the dark spruce forests, full of black shadows. Snap – the thread of a stream. Snap – the yellow rapeseed fields on the Czech side of the border. Snap – the sky. Snap – the clouds. Then he found it hard to breathe, as if he were about to suffocate.

He went higher still and reached the tourist trail, where some young people with knapsacks greeted him as he wiped away the sweat that was flooding his eyes, and went on their way. He actually felt sorry they had gone. He could have told them how he came here when he was their age, how just over there on the damp moss he had made love to a woman for the first time; or he could have shown them where the Olbrichts' windmill had stood down below, its restless arms a landmark for the village. He tried to call after them, but there wasn't enough air in his lungs. His heart was thumping away in his throat, making him choke. To turn back now would have meant a lost opportunity, so with a huge effort he went on another few hundred metres and found himself at the very top, where the border ran. Up ahead he could see some whitewashed border posts. He was completely out of breath now; the thin air was clearly not good for him. He had forgotten that it could be bad for lungs that had become used to damp sea breezes.

He felt weak as he imagined the return journey. What if I were to die here, he thought, as he staggered up to the posts. For some reason this idea seemed funny. To have climbed such a long way, to have come here half-way across Europe, to have lived so many years in a port, produced two children, built a house, loved and been loved, and survived the war . . . He laughed out loud to himself and took a chocolate from his pocket. He stopped and unwrapped it carefully from the gold foil, but as soon as he put it into his mouth he knew he would never swallow it. His body was otherwise engaged. His heart was counting out a rhythm, his arteries were slackening, his brain was busy producing the narcotic of a merciful death. He sat down by a border post with the chocolate in his mouth, the distant circle of the horizon drawing his gaze. He had one foot in the Czech Republic and the other in Poland. He sat there for

about an hour, slowly dying. His final thought was of Erika waiting for him in the car below, and sure to be worrying. Maybe she had informed the police by now. But even she seemed somehow very far away, at sea level, quite unreal, as if he had dreamed his entire life. He had no idea exactly when he died, because it didn't happen all at once, but bit by bit, as everything inside him gradually fell apart.

The Czech border guards found him as dusk was falling. One of them tried to find a pulse in his wrist, while the younger stared in horror at the brown stream of chocolate trickling from his mouth to his neck. The first one took out his radio and gave the other a quizzical look, then they both glanced at their watches and hesitated. They were probably thinking about their supper, for which they'd be late, and about the report they'd have to write. And then, acting in unison, they shoved Peter's leg from the Czech to the Polish side. But that wasn't quite enough for them, because then they gently tugged his whole body northwards into Poland. And, feeling guilty, they went off in silence.

Half an hour later the Polish border guards' torches lit up Peter. 'Jesus!' cried one of them, recoiling, while the other instinctively reached for his gun and looked around. There was total silence; down in the valleys the towns looked like thrown away chocolate wrappers reflecting the stars. The Poles looked Peter in the face and whispered to each other. Then, gravely and silently, they took him by the arms and carried him over to the Czech side.

So, before his soul had departed for ever, this was how Peter Dieter remembered his death – as a mechanical movement one way, then the other, like teetering on the edge, like standing on a bridge. And the very last image to appear in his mind as it was lulled to sleep was the memory of the Christmas crib from Albendorf, with little wooden people shifting about against a

painted landscape, performing their set mechanical movements. The wooden people walk along, driving their wooden cows, with little wooden dogs running by and someone giving a wooden laugh; higher up a figure with a bucket waves, while painted smoke streams up into the painted sky, and painted birds fly blithely westwards. And two pairs of little wooden soldiers carry Peter Dieter's wooden body from one side to the other for all eternity.

Rhubarb

Marta grows rhubarb behind the house. The small plot is on a slope and the rows of plants are never straight – they run round some large stones, and then line up with the rough boundary of her property. In winter the rhubarb disappears underground beneath the snow, twists its fleshy stalks and grows in the opposite direction, backwards into its own embryo, its own sleeping roots. Towards the end of March the ground swells and it is born anew. This year as usual it was small, whitish-green and soft as a new-born baby's skin. It grew at night, when we could hear it rustling in the grass, producing tiny waves of sound, waking the other plants. A day later the vegetable patches were well established. Marta stood gazing at them with flushed cheeks – it was as if a sleeping army had arisen, as if soldiers had sprouted from underground in battle formation. First the crowns of their heads appeared, then their powerful shoulders and erect bodies standing to attention, from which a rippling green canopy would finally unfold.

In May Marta cut down her soldiers with a sharp knife, as if ordering them to 'stand at ease'. They must have seen her coming down at them, a large, imposing old woman with a knife

in her hand. I can imagine the rasp of the knife across the firm stalks, the sour juice on the steel blade.

Marta took bunches of equal length to the vegetable market in Nowa Ruda and sold them for the first spring compote or rhubarb pie, much missed all winter long.

I helped her tie up the bundles. We set aside the imperfect, damaged or too short stems, and later baked a cake on my little Ukrainian stove.

Cosmogonies

My favourite philosopher is Archemanes. According to Archemanes the world was created as a result of the synergy of two primal forces. He understood these powerful forces to be both eternal and universal. Their synergy would best be described as never-ending consumption – one devours the other, ceaselessly – and the existence of the world is dependent on this. The first of the two forces is Chthonos, which keeps reproducing, continuously burgeoning and proliferating. The aim of its existence is creation, which it achieves not only by multiplying itself, but also by producing elements that are not like it, or are even its opposite. So within Chthonos there is constant growth, blind and automatic – the cannon fodder of existence. The other force is Chaos, which engulfs Chthonos, completely consuming and devouring it. Chaos is immaterial; it is a principle of nature that dissolves Chthonos's space as if preying on it. Without Chthonos it could not exist, and vice versa. Chaos destroys Chthonos, reducing it to nothingness.

The connection between these two forces is unusually intense, and from it arises Chronos – the principle of nature that could best be compared to the eye of the storm. At the heart

of all this consumption, annihilation and destruction, it appears as an element of calm, like an oasis, almost mirage-like, characterized by constancy, regularity, order, even a certain harmony that brings the world into being. Chronos puts a brake on the process of consumption and gives it a certain form. On the one hand it filters the generation of things produced by Chthonos, grouping them into little islets ordered by time, which is the essence of Chronos, its fundamental principle; on the other it weakens the impact of the destruction wreaked by Chaos. At this point the world and its basic energies come into being.

Chronos gives birth to all kinds of gods. Their fundamental feature is love (*philia*). They shine brightly with love, which is the force they use to try to overcome the hatred (*neikos*) of the elements, in order to realize the unified, indestructible, spiritual nature of the world. To this end they create people, animals and plants, and endow them with the potential for love.

I told Marta all this while we were tying up the bundles of rhubarb. When we had finished, Marta told me something like this: whenever people say 'everything', 'always', 'never', 'every', you should watch out, because they're really only talking about themselves – in the real world such generalities don't exist.

I shrugged.

Who wrote the life of the saint and how he knew it all

Paschalis stayed at the Martan sisters' convent to write the history of their secret patroness. He was given a separate cell in the farm building, at a distance from the rest of the convent. The cell was large, warm and comfortable, and had a high window covered at night with wooden shutters, and a broad, heavy writing

desk with a special hole for an inkwell. Paschalis's window faced south, so as soon as the winter clouds had floated away, a broad shaft of light settled in the room, alive with particles of dust and restless flies. Whenever he felt cold at his desk he stood in the rays of sunlight and warmed his chilly body. He could see the chain of gentle mountains that seemed to be rippling in their own imperceptible dance, and he soon knew every curve of that unusual horizon, every dip and rise.

Twice a day the nuns left food for him at the door – bread and boiled vegetables, and wine on Sundays and holy days. Once every two or three days the prioress came to visit him. 'They asked about you,' she said at the start, when he wasn't yet sure how to set about his work. 'They asked, so I said you had gone off alone. Then they said something nasty must have happened to you on the way, that you must have been attacked by wolves, and I said no one had seen any wolves round here for years, and that you must have run away, gone off into the mountains . . .' 'Why did you say that, Mother?' asked Paschalis in amazement. 'I'd rather see you run away and break your vows than lie dead and bleeding on the ground.' 'I don't know how to start my work,' he said sadly. The prioress showed him a small book that was lying on the desk. 'First read this carefully, and you'll come to know the woman who wrote it. Keep reading it until you have a detailed awareness of her – what she looked like, how she moved, the sound of her voice. Then it will be easier for you to understand how to write something similar, and what the reader wants to know.'

So Paschalis began by reading the book. At first he found it boring, and he didn't understand much of it, because his Latin wasn't too good. But then he noticed with amusement that the saint's Latin left much to be desired – there were Czech, German and Polish words stuck in it, like raisins in the nuns' cakes.

Gradually he began to find in Kummernis's writing the same longing that he bore in his own heart – the yearning to become someone else – and that heartened him.

The book was strange, because it could be read from both ends at once. In one direction it was entitled *Hilaria*, but if turned upside down it began again as *Tristia* – joys and griefs. In the middle of the book, between the two parts, there were some extra pages written in a different colour of ink, entitled *Teachings for prayer*.

There was another reason for Paschalis's lack of concentration – he was drawn to the life of the women on the other side of the wall. Sometimes he could hear their voices and the patter of their sandals. At mealtimes he would stand by the door and listen for the moment when the gentle tap of crockery against the flagstones announced that there was a woman on the other side of it. Yet he never had the courage to open it. He only left his cell at night when the echoes of life in the convent had died down. He was allowed to do this and to walk along one authorized route – from his cell to the chapel housing the picture of the crucified Kummernis. Gradually the saint's fair, naked breasts started to arouse desire in him. He dreamed of nestling his face between them. Sometimes he dreamed of something more painful too, something to do with Celestyn, which he knew to be sinful and forbidden, and he would test out these fantasies on himself at night, cuddling up to the coarse blanket and investigating his own hesitant body.

In *Hilaria* the first fragment to capture his attention read: 'I could lie down on the ground and spread my arms and legs wide, and thus lie waiting until Your sky was filled with sunlight which would fall upon me, caressing my belly and breasts.'

That was how he first imagined her, lying on a gentle, grassy mountain slope behind the convent among the brightly blooming

sow thistles, whose colour dazzled Paschalis. He wiped away the image. Now she lay surrounded by grass and a vast, clear sky. Her body was like a cross laid out on the hillside, like a sign that said, 'Look, look over here!' Down below people were walking along the road, driving oxen, dogs were running about, a man burst into sudden laughter, the little bells tinkled on the sheep's necks, higher up a man carried a hare he'd caught; he waved. Smoke from the chimneys drifted into the sky, and birds flew blithely westwards, Paschalis could see all this.

He thought about what it would be like to lie down on top of someone who is defenceless on the ground with their arms and legs spread wide, to press his entire weight against that body, to fall on it and snuggle into it . . . And then what? Paschalis didn't know. At night he rolled the blanket up into a long bolster, laid it on the ground and imagined that there was a woman's body lying beneath him, filled to the brim with warmth, soft and hard all at once, alive and trembling. He would carefully climb on top of it, his breathing becoming shallow and fitful, as if he were suddenly deprived of air, and lie there, feeling no relief. All he could think of was to pin this body to the ground. Afterwards, as he lay in bed getting his breath back, he thought about Kummernis's father – and decided he must surely have felt the same way.

'What nonsense,' the prioress said indignantly next day, and Paschalis felt ashamed that he had been so bold as to confide in her. 'I didn't give you refuge and food for you to invent such things. When you feel hungry, eat. When you feel lonely, pray. Have you read the *Teachings for prayer* yet?'

Yes, he had read them, but he couldn't understand them. What did it mean, not to think of anything, he wondered. How was it possible? He stood at the window in the shaft of light and inspected his thoughts. They seemed to be everywhere, commenting on the landscape he could see outside the window;

remarking, Oh look, a cloud, trees, mountains, see what a shadow they cast on the grassy pastures. And when he closed his eyes, his thoughts changed, but went on coming: I'm hungry, is it time for my meal yet, what's that noise from above, is someone running, who's the tall nun who milks the cows in the evening? Or else he saw images: the prioress's attentive face, the faint moustache on her upper lip, her big toes sticking out of her sandals, the curtain in front of Kummernis's picture, the body on the cross, a dead fly in the holy water. How can you not think?

Sometimes Paschalis felt like a prisoner in his cell. His legs craved movement, and he gazed longingly at the mountains outside. He was sorry he had never seen cities or palaces, or churches that seem to touch the sky. Far away to the south the Pope was busy holding council with the synod on how to save the world from the Lutherans. He imagined the world – it was beautiful, as in the icon he had gazed at for hours in the monastery. A gentle mountain landscape, sandy-coloured castles in the valleys, rivers on which little boats sailed by, strips of ploughed fields with neatly dressed peasants, a mill, a beggar, and some dogs. And there before his eyes sat not the Virgin Mary and the Holy Infant, but the Pope, a large, important man, a bit like Celestyn or the Bishop of Glatz.

Paschalis had thought that if he stayed at the convent the nuns would treat him as their equal, dressing him in a habit, allowing him a place at their table and admitting him into their life. But they had shut him up in a cell and were treating him as if he didn't exist. They had told him to write the life of a woman he didn't know, and to collate her writings, which he didn't understand. But who will write my story? he thought. The next time the prioress came he told her he was giving up, and that he wanted to go to Rome and ask the Pope to recognize him as a woman, so that he could come back as a fully eligible nun. The prioress blinked and

said nothing. He pressed his lips to her hand. 'All right then,' she replied. 'I'll tell you why I allowed you to stay. When I saw you for the first time you reminded me of a fawn, a little wounded fawn. But in time fawns grow up into powerful stags. The day you asked me if you could stay here, I prayed to Kummernis because I didn't know what to do. And I had a dream – though it is rare for me to dream. I dreamed of a beautiful ivory carving that showed two animals, a stag and a lion. The stag was eating the lion and had already swallowed its head.' The prioress fell silent and stared expectantly at Paschalis. 'Then what happened?' he asked. 'Nothing, that was all.' 'What does it mean?' he asked. She shrugged. 'I don't know what it means, but I do know that such dreams are unusual. You should stay here, write the history of the saint and take it to the bishop in Glatz, and then to the Pope himself in Rome, so that they may canonize her.'

That evening Paschalis imagined the scene in Rome in detail. The Pope – who now resembles Celestyn – is moved by his work and his long journey. He lays his hand on Paschalis's head, for which the bishops and kings envy the young monk. Then he turns to all those rulers, rich men and commoners gathered at his court and declares: Henceforth Paschalis is a woman! On the return journey Paschalis's body changes at every mile. His breasts grow, his skin becomes smooth, and finally one night his male genitalia vanish irretrievably, as if pulled out by the roots. All that is left is an opening that leads mysteriously into the depths of his body.

Grass cake

The Polish guard who had shifted the German's body on to the other side of the border used to patrol the local woods in winter.

His job was to make sure that the old road that led through the forest and into the Czech Republic remained blocked to stop any potential bootleggers or car smugglers from crossing the border. Each year in early spring the guards go there with a chainsaw and cut down a few trees so that they fall across the path. They use nature to defend the state border – with the permission of the forestry department, of course.

The guard knew everyone in the district. He could spot a stranger immediately, and he would check his identity and call in to base. Whoever the person was, whether a mushroom picker or a tourist who had wandered off the trail, the guard would watch him from above through binoculars until he moved away from the border and went on his way.

He saw a great many people: individuals, some tottering along and some striding purposefully; couples who soon vanished into the bushes; groups of people bowling along in single file, their heads drooping under the weight of rucksacks; people with animals – dogs, horses, cows, or a basket of blind kittens for drowning; people with objects and machines, on bikes, in cars, on tractors (in fact only one person in the district had a tractor), with nets, with chainsaws, with plastic bags full of mushrooms, with half a litre of vodka bought on the black market . . . The guard had a sort of theatre laid out before him, with, unfortunately, a rather dull performance on show. He had to fill in a lot of the details himself, and he also had to know certain things, such as where Whatsisname was off to, pushing his bike along the track; what it meant when he saw a white Opel in front of the house below, or a dark blue bus; open or closed shutters at another house; sheep in the mountain pass rather than down by the forest; or an iron bedstead set out in the orchard. He had to know such things, or else he wouldn't understand what he was seeing – he would be looking, but not seeing anything.

Naturally enough, he was prone to falling into a mindless state quite often, staring at the world in front of him as if it were a picture. Down below people walked along the asphalt road, herding cows; dogs were running, a man burst into sudden laughter, little bells tinkled on the sheep's necks; higher up a man carried a hare he'd poached, he waved to someone, smoke from the chimneys drifted into the sky, and birds flew blithely westwards. This picture goes on for ever; it seems to be eternal.

In the afternoon of New Year's Eve this young border guard, with a face as ruddy and glowing as a freshly baked bun, was riding his huge motorbike slowly through the snow. The wheels kept sinking, and he had to be careful not to slip into the deep gully that ran along the roadside. He noticed a lot of footprints curving round, turning a full circle and running forward again. The bigger snowdrifts were imprinted with human shapes – someone must have got down in the snowdrift, rolled over and somersaulted, or lain down in the snow and waved their arms and legs to and fro, leaving the shape of a huge bird.

He came across them at the pass. They wore silly, brightly coloured hats and definitely looked suspect. They giggled when he asked to see their identity cards, casting one another knowing looks and bursting out laughing. He thought they must be drunk, and felt like an idiot. After all, it was New Year's Eve. But the merrier they were, the more serious he became. The more they exuded mirth, almost floating above the snow with joy, the more firmly earthbound he felt and the deeper his feet sank. Their good humour irritated him.

But they were just young. He found the girl beautiful and remote. She chewed the end of a wisp of fair hair, and stared enigmatically, as if she had just awoken from a pleasant dream, an erotic one perhaps.

They didn't have their identity cards on them in a border zone, so he couldn't even take down their details.

'Our rucksacks are in the cabin,' they said. Like it or not, he would have to go back with them. They took it in turns to push the motorbike through the snow. The boys knew all about motorbikes, but that didn't impress him at all. He had the feeling that he was comical and unimportant in their eyes, so he casually unbuttoned his jacket to show them his shiny leather holster.

The inside of the cabin smelled of damp and the remains of autumn, dry leaves and hay. It also stank of mice and it was cold. He sat down at the table and copied out their details from their identity cards. They were all from Wrocław. They lived in streets with metropolitan, worldly sounding names: Vienna Street, Wyspiański Embankment, Sienkiewicz Street, Cosmonauts' Avenue. He realized they had come here for New Year's Eve, to get drunk and fool around. They obviously weren't bootleggers and were no threat to the border whatsoever. But it didn't seem right now just to withdraw and say, all right, I'll be on my way then, I've got a party this evening too, my good suit is hanging on the wardrobe door, ironed and ready to go, the vodka's chilling in the fridge and the champagne's bubbling in the sideboard.

Amid the intolerable giggling that made it so hard for him to write, the girl set a mug of tea before him. He drank it gratefully. It warmed him inside and made him feel relaxed. He lit a cigarette. He ate a piece of dark, exotic cake that tasted of herbs and spices, a bit like gingerbread. Their laughter was aimed at his authority; he should either leave them in peace or issue them with a fine, then ride off towards the forest, return to the post to sign off duty and go home. But he sat and ate the cake that they had so eagerly shoved under his nose, exchanging more conspiratorial glances as they did so. They all watched him put it

into his mouth, chew it and swallow. It was as if their thought waves were connected and they were having a conversation that he couldn't hear; he alone was the stranger among them. They were the 'us' and he was the 'them', the outsider, on his own home ground!

Finally, he went outside and called base to say he was on his way back. It was already dark. They waved their hats after him and burst into gales of laughter.

He drove off along the familiar road, but it seemed very long somehow. He should have been at the little bridge by now, but he had only just passed the last of the houses. He kept thinking about those young people, in fact he couldn't stop thinking about them, and they seemed to him like wolf people. My God, what a shocking thought. Wolf people. He stopped the motorbike, the lights went out and he found himself in freezing darkness. In the distance he could see a village, its windows shining like square holes cut into space. Maybe he should turn round, go back to the cabin and tell them. But tell them what? He yanked at the motorbike and turned it round. He started the engine and set off, but soon tumbled into a snowdrift. The front wheel was buried in the snow. His hands began to tingle uncomfortably, forcing him to move his fingers around inside his gloves.

Something had gone wrong with time. Hundreds of thoughts kept appearing in his head, torn, frayed and incomplete. Words came spilling out of them like flour from a burst bag. He started trying to gather them up, but it took so long. A whole hour may have passed while he went on tugging half-heartedly at the snow-bound motorbike. He glanced at his watch, but its face was dark, so he started searching for his lighter. He must have left it at the cabin where they were baking cakes made of hay. The smell of it came back to him and made him feel sick. He

rubbed his face with a handful of snow, but it didn't help. He stared at his motorbike, and it looked as if it had fallen asleep; he'd have to leave it like that until morning. He took off his jacket and covered its tired body. It purred gratefully.

He set off back towards the mountain pass and the dark houses in the village. He could still taste the cake on his lips and he felt unwell again. Un-well. Unw-ell. He lacked ell, something to do with food and warmth. For a moment the wave of time stopped flowing, and the guard had the lucid thought that he had made a mistake in going to their cabin on foot without a jacket; he should hurry, because it was dangerous to walk about the fields at night. There were still wolves around.

And just then he heard them: from somewhere high up in the forest came a distraught, piercing cry, a desperate rallying call.

He had seen a wolf at the zoo in Wrocław. It looked stuffed, although it was moving. Its fur was matted and unhealthy. It reminded him of a certain mongrel that had a daily ritual of chasing his motorbike and trying to grab his trouser leg. But it wasn't exactly the same, because the mongrel had his set time to live, while the wolf was timeless. Wolves aren't born and they don't die. They even exist where there aren't any wolves. This revelation astonished the guard so much that he stopped and began to listen hard. The howling had fallen silent, but now he could hear the patter of small feet muffled by the snow.

He was seized with longing for his lighter, as strong as the desire for a woman. He could use it to light his way and find out what time it was. That would explain a lot. By the light of its flame he'd be able to drag himself up the hill, and go where he wanted. But right now he didn't know if he should go right or left, up or down. Either way, he kept on going, sliding smoothly across the snow as if he were on skis. He was enjoying it. He was doing well, moving towards the warmth and light, towards the

girl with the dream-like beauty and the wisp of fair hair. Behind him in the snow paw prints were silently appearing.

He saw it. Not in front, or behind him, just somewhere out in the darkness. It was huge and powerful. The whiteness of its fur gleamed in the light of the snow.

'Wolf, in the name of the Polish border I beg you to spare my life,' he said into the darkness.

The wolf stopped behind him, wondering.

A dream from the Internet

I was in a strange, deserted area. I knew I had lost my way. I wandered about this mournful wilderness in a constant twilight. Now and again I came across traces of myself: my footprints, my lost lighter, my hat and my camera, and it cheered me up to realize I was walking in my own tracks. Suddenly I was standing by a stream. The grey sky was reflected in it. I could see my own face – I felt surprised, because it was a different face. My whole life I had thought I looked different. I started washing and I noticed to my dismay that the water was washing the flesh away from my face. It didn't hurt at all. My face was melting as if it were made of wax, dissolving in the water. Finally to my horror I felt bare bones beneath my fingers. At this point the terrible truth hit me – I had died, and there was no way back.

Ephemerides

Marta has one habit that I find particularly annoying – she stands behind me and watches whatever I'm doing over my shoulder. I can hear her breathing: light, rapid and shallow – the

breathing of an old person. And I'm aware of her smell; it's always the smell of bed-linen and sleeping bodies. Children sometimes smell like that. It's a smell that adults are eager to smother in perfumes and deodorants so that they smell like things, rather than people.

Marta stops and stands over me, and whatever I'm doing, I start to do it wrong. If I'm reading, I lose the thread of the sentence. If I'm writing, I instantly stop having anything to say. I gently draw away from her, to avoid hurting her feelings, but I'm upset with her.

The only time it doesn't bother me is when I'm reading ephemerides, which are infallibly precise tables showing the positions of the planets – maybe because there aren't any words or sentences in them, or even drawings that you have to take in visually. There are just columns of numbers, utterly impassive, unchanging numbers from, one to sixty, immune from misunderstanding, calculated and printed out in black and white once and for all, covering all the options for describing time. There are twelve simple symbols representing space, and ten more for the heavenly bodies – and that's it. By casting an eye over the ranks and columns, with a bit of practice you can take in the whole thing, see a subtle, temporary balance found only in the paper mobiles that my sister makes – carefully weighted three-dimensional constructions suspended on silken threads and set in motion by the slightest breath of air in the room. But mobiles are fragile, and it is much easier to destroy them than to create them, whereas the world expressed in ephemerides is wonderfully permanent, truly everlasting. That must be why nothing can disturb me when I'm looking at them.

There was no sign of the comet in my ephemerides, however.

The fire

'It's the year of the comet,' said Agnieszka as she poured milk into my billycan. 'It's the penultimate year of the Pope's life. Two elements are going to meet, and then there'll be a strange winter. People will start to drop like flies.'

Sometimes Agnieszka makes prophecies. If you spend all day looking at the village of Pietno, the only thing you're likely to predict is the end of the world. Time after time she has given us a different version of future events. Her imagination is boundless, on top of which she knows how to manipulate words, so she always produces a story that changes, just like Whatsisname's, depending on the season, place and circumstances in which it is told: evening or morning, by the well or at the Lido restaurant, with wine or vodka.

After this particular prediction I was on the way home when I stopped and drank some milk straight from the can – it tasted like pure, white heaven. I started thinking about mushrooms, wondering whether there would be any yet. It was warm enough for the first field mushrooms, damp enough for boletus and sunny enough for puffballs. Then, my mouth full of milk, I noticed that the meadows above the houses were ablaze. Fanned by the wind, the fire was moving in a narrow chain uphill towards the forest. The thin line advanced slowly and silently, glittering in the sunlight; it left a wide black trail behind it, rather like the shadows of clouds, but a hundred times darker.

'Stop!' I said, hoping it would stop, like a computer game, or a television weather map where the world is just made up of wavy lines and numbers.

But nothing happened. Someone was calling me. It was Agnieszka, standing in the pass, her small, squat figure looking quite misshapen in a baggy old tracksuit.

'When the wind changes direction your houses will catch fire,' she shouted. I thought I could hear a note of satisfaction in her voice.

I rushed down the hill. The milk spilled out of the swinging billycan and splashed my shoes.

We worked for several hours before the soot-caked firemen arrived. They said the meadows on the other side of the hills were on fire. They were stripped to the waist and quite relaxed. They stepped nonchalantly through the wall of fire and took control of either end of it. They certainly knew what they were doing, and were able to manoeuvre it as if it were a long ribbon stretched out on the ground. They twisted its two ends around until they crossed, forming a circle. For a while the wind dropped and a great, fiery ring rose up, its flames raging like a whirlwind. Through the quivering air I could see pointed tufts of grass vanishing for ever. The fiery cyclone roared until the fire consumed itself and died out.

The meadows, part of the forest and some blackberry patches had burned down. I was particularly sad about the blackberries – in destroying them the fire had killed off future juiciness. Marta showed us the best way to put out the burning grass, patting the fire gently with a spruce branch, as if giving it a little smack. If you did it too hard you gave it air. Marta also told us that the meadows catch fire every few years so it's nothing to worry about. R. has a different opinion on the matter.

Who wrote the life of the saint and how he knew it all

He began to write slowly, laboriously, building word by word the story of the little girl on whom in later years Our Lord had

bestowed His face before consigning her to a martyr's death. The first sentence ran as follows: 'Kummernis was born imperfect, but only according to a human understanding of imperfection.' The second read: 'Sometimes, however, what is imperfect in the world of men is perfect in the world of God.' This took him four days. He didn't actually understand what he had written, what it really meant. Or, rather, he did understand it, but not in words or thoughts. He lay on the floor, closed his eyes and repeated those sentences until they had lost all meaning. Only then did he realize that he had written the most important thing of all. Somehow he knew what it would be like from now on; that he would only be able to go on writing if he cut himself off from the taste of food, the smell of the air, and sounds. He would become dry and numb, with no senses, he would cease to enjoy the shaft of light in his cell, and the warmth of the sun would seem weak, not worth his attention, like everything else he had once loved. His body would turn to wood, retreat and wait for his return.

He wrote on, and couldn't wait until it was finally finished and he could be himself and live in his own body again, even loll about in it in a comfortable bed.

He wrote about the saint's childhood, isolated within a large family, lost among her siblings. 'One day her father, wanting to call her to him, forgot her name, for he had so many children and so many things on his mind, had waged so many wars and had so many serfs that his daughter's name had slipped his memory.' Paschalis was sure now that Kummernis's childhood must have been unusual – her frail body exuded a balmy fragrance, and in her bed fresh roses were found, even though it was winter. Once when she was placed before a mirror while preparing for a feast, the image of the face of the Son of God appeared on its surface and remained there for some time.

Paschalis recognized that this must have prompted Kummernis's father ('he was strong in stature, violent and quick to anger') to entrust his daughter's education to the nuns. The convent looked just as it did from the windows of his cell – a large building, looking out on to the mountains. The Mother Superior who took care of the girl was like the prioress. Of course, she was less distinct, she didn't have down on her upper lip, but her model was able to recognize herself in what he had written.

'How do you know all this?' she asked him upon reading the first few pages. But there was a note of admiration in her voice.

How did he know it? He didn't know how. Such knowledge comes from under closed eyelids, from prayers, from dreams, from looking at the world around you, from everywhere. Maybe the saint herself was speaking to him, maybe the scenes from her life originated among the verses of her writings.

He was hindered by the fact that the saint had lived long ago, before his parents or even his grandparents were alive – so how was he to know what her world looked like? After all, trees grow, people cut down forests, new roads appear, and old ones get overgrown with weeds. His village, too, must surely have been different from how he remembered it in childhood. And what about Rome, which he had never seen? Was it just as he imagined? How was he to write about things he had never seen or experienced?

Whether he wanted to or not, he always saw Kummernis in familiar scenery, at this convent, in this courtyard, among the chickens whose eggs he ate, under the chestnut tree whose shade he enjoyed in summer, in a habit just like the prioress's. Kummernis went on living as long as he wrote about her as a living person, and she would never cease to exist, not even if he

put her to death over and over again in his thoughts. And he realized that the aim of his writing was to reconcile all possible time scales, places and landscapes into one single image that would remain fixed, never ageing or changing.

Paschalis spent until midday writing the story of the saint, and in the afternoons he painstakingly began to transcribe *Tristia* and *Hilaria*. More and more often as he finished writing out one of her sentences, he would grasp its entire inner meaning in a sudden flash of understanding. He found it deeply moving and a source of wonder that the same words could be read and understood in so many different ways. He sat without moving, pen in hand, but he was unable to detach his thoughts from what he had discovered.

Kummernis had written: 'I saw myself as a jewel-encrusted casket. I opened the lid, and inside was another casket, of pure coral, and inside it yet another, of pure mother-of-pearl. Impatiently I kept on opening myself, not knowing what it would lead to, until in the smallest casket, in the tiniest little box, at the very bottom of all the others, I saw Your image, vivid and bright with colour. And straight away I snapped all the clasps shut, for fear of losing You from inside myself, and ever since I have been in harmony with myself, and I have even come to love myself, because I bear You within me.

'Nothing that bears You within itself can be in vain, so I too am not in vain.

'I am ever pregnant with You, just as other creatures too bear You within themselves, without even knowing it.'

When Paschalis reached the moment in his history of the saint when Kummernis fled from her fiancé to the convent, he became so excited that he jumped ahead and started writing about the final events, her imprisonment and crucifixion. He didn't need sleep or food. The nights were sweltering, so he

didn't feel cold, though his fingers were stiff and the back of his neck ached.

Now he could see Kummernis as clearly as if he had known her – as if she were the nun who tended the cows, or the one who brought him food. She was tall, but slender, with large hands and feet like the prioress. She had thick brown hair, plaited and pinned up. Her white breasts were perfectly round. She spoke quickly and passionately.

And then he dreamed about her. In the dream he met her in corridors that combined features of the convent and the monastery. She was carrying some utensils, and as she came close to him she handed him a tumbler. As soon as he drank from it he realized that he had made a mistake and had drunk fire. She smiled enigmatically and kissed him on the lips. In the dream he thought he was going to die, that the fire was already working and he was past help. He felt forlorn and friendless.

Next morning when the prioress came by he told her about his dream, and she hugged him affectionately to her rough habit. 'Your hair has grown, my son,' she said, winding a black curl around her finger. 'It's already over your ears. You're starting to look like a girl.'

After compline she took him out into the garden. Paschalis felt intoxicated by all the fragrances and the warm air. The roses and white lilies were already in bloom, and immaculate herb and vegetable patches made simple patterns among the apple and pear trees. The prioress watched him with a smile as he walked in delight among the flowers. Suddenly she tore off a mint leaf and rubbed it between her fingers. 'If I weren't . . .' she hesitated on the edge of these words, '. . . I could adopt you as my son,' she said. 'Or rather as your daughter,' he corrected her.

Towards the end of June Paschalis wrote the final sentence of *The Life of Kummernis of Schonau*. It took him another month to write out a fair copy and to finish transcribing *Tristia* and *Hilaria*.

Meanwhile the prioress had written a long letter to the Bishop of Glatz and soon Paschalis was ready to set off on his mission. His habit was laundered and mended. It must have shrunk (or he had grown), because it didn't reach his ankles any more. He was given new sandals and a leather shoulder bag.

'You are sure to encounter many adventures on your journey, and maybe even temptations. The country is full of unrest . . .' Paschalis nodded in anticipation of what the prioress was about to say, expecting to hear what his mother would have said, but what she did then say was strange: 'Only succumb to those adventures that you think worthwhile.' He looked at her in surprise. She hugged him tightly to her breast and stroked his hair for a long while. He gently freed himself from her embrace and kissed her hand. Her lips brushed against his brow, and he could feel the down on her upper lip. 'God brought me to you,' he said. 'God be with you, my son.'

Paschalis set off the next day at dawn; just past the convent gate he entered a summer morning mist, through which the sun was shining as weakly as the moon. He walked towards the mountains, going higher and higher until his head emerged above the sea of mist and he could see the vivid green mountain slopes and a bright blue sky. He had two books in his bag – Kummernis's writings and her *Life*, bound in wooden covers. Suddenly he felt light-hearted and happy.

Before him rose strange, flat mountains, as if the giants had sliced off their tops with an enormous knife. They stuck out of the ground like the ruins of the giants' palaces, symbols of their power crumbling to dust. Paschalis knew there was a winding

road that ran in a comfortable arc around them, then on via Neurode to Glatz, but after a moment's hesitation he went straight on towards those vast, flat summits.

Grass allergy

Whenever the grass is producing pollen R. and I both get hay fever: our noses swell up and our eyes run with tears – and we go weeping our way over the meadows and weed-choked waste ground. There's nowhere in the house to hide from the invisible specks of dust – except maybe the deepest cellar, where the water is always flowing, and we would have to hide there in the dark until the afternoon. In town it's different – you can always shut the windows and stay at home. In town our eyes only ever encountered grass from a distance, and even then it was cut short; the local council never let it go to seed. The only ground our feet ever came into contact with was the football pitch and the little squares where we took the dog after work. We could remain indifferent to the pollen; we didn't have to think about it at all. Since last year the grass here has grown up on to the terrace and filled in the narrow strips of earth between the tiles. It has also invaded my flowerbeds and choked the irises.

R. went out with a scythe and bravely cut the grass right down to the ground. As it fell, its feathery tops brushed against his legs, leaving red marks on his skin that later turned into a fine rash. People like us are unable to kill grass with impunity – it puts up a fight against us. 'We're alien here,' I said, but R. reckons that it's all right, it's the sacrifice our bodies make to the meadows, the only way the grass can relate to our existence. If it couldn't do us any harm, it wouldn't have any awareness of us at

all. Then we'd be alien, like the souls of the dead that walk unnoticed among the living – just because they can't hurt us, we deny their existence.

Franz Frost

Franz Frost liked going to church for a particular reason. He and his wife had their own places – he sat on the right with the other men, while she sat on the left. The church divided their family, and they used to look at each other from opposite sides of the nave, casting each other glances. His wife would check whether he looked good in his Sunday suit, while he would proudly admire her artful coiffure, all ringlets and hairpins, styled in silence at the dressing-table in the bedroom, amid the scent of violets, lavender and starched linen. Then, during mass, as the congregation tunefully sang their responses to the priest's chanting, Franz's eyes would wander from his wife's head to the other things that most interested him in church. The way the benches were made, for example – the skilful design of the invisible wooden pins that joined the seats and the backrest. Or he would delight in the metal plaques engraved with names. Their screws had rounded heads, and it felt nice to touch their cool bulges. Even when he looked at the icons hanging on the walls of the church he wasn't at all attracted by their content, but by the sort of board or canvas they were painted on, or their frames. Yes, the frames round the icons were the real works of art.

There was one icon in the church that he couldn't stop looking at, although he knew it inside out. It showed the Virgin Mary with an entourage of saints. One of them was holding his own chopped-off head on a plate. But the important thing was that the icon was round, and its wonderfully ornate frame

formed a perfect circle on the wall. Franz tried to work out what sort of wood must have been used to make something so beautiful. After mass he often went up to the icon and inspected the layers in the frame. It wasn't made up of separate pieces, as he had at first expected, and as common sense and his own experience led him to believe. It had been made out of a single piece of wood, with the ends joined together at the bottom, admittedly in a rather flimsy way, using ordinary tin. He was convinced that specially prepared wood had been used to make the frame, and that a young branch had been bent so that it would grow in a circle. It may have been bound with wire, bent to the ground, and deliberately forced to grow into the space that completed the invisible circle. The tree that produced such an eccentric branch must have felt ashamed. The curved branch must have spoiled the perpendicular pattern of the spruces and alders. Everyone's gaze – both man and beast – must have been arrested by it. Plants aren't aware that geometrical figures exist; at best they copy them by accident. Yet even in this unintentional mimicry a knot will always appear, a lump, a lack of symmetry. People call this 'imperfection' because for some reason they're convinced that perfection does exist.

Franz was excited by the existence of shapes that are invisible to the eye, patterns and designs that are right under your nose, right in front of your eyes, yet have no substance, so your hand passes through them like smoke. Maybe that's the nature of all existence, both past and future, he thought – maybe there are things that exist, but are inaccessible to us. Maybe the pump that he was having trouble designing already existed, a brilliant solution to the problem of pushing water uphill; maybe there were machines that people had yet to invent, and shapes which were so far inconceivable, and devices designed for copying things and capturing them in metal, wood or stone. A space full of

invisible cogs, gears, solid shapes, obvious and elementary, but not yet within human reach.

Sometime early in the 1930s Franz Frost felt that something wasn't right. He would walk up the hill between the two villages and sniff the wind, inspect blades of grass and rub earth between his fingers. He noticed something he had felt before – that nothing was quite the same. The grass seemed sharper – it cut his fingers at the slightest careless move – and the earth had become darker and redder than before. It also seemed to him that the paths among the meadows had grown longer and that he had further to walk home, which made him late for dinner. Even the potatoes didn't taste right; the young ones, freshly dug up, tasted of damp and moss, as if they'd been lying in the cellar for ages. People's faces were becoming hazy, and when he went to church on Sundays he felt as if he were looking at blurred photographs. He confided in his wife, who said maybe it was his eyes, night blindness or some such ailment. The idea had never even entered his head. He thought it through and came to the conclusion that it wasn't his eyes. Fabrics had changed their texture, after all, and the taste of food and the smell of wood had changed. Knives cut the bread differently somehow, and the buzzing of insects sounded different. It wasn't his eyes or any of his other senses – the change was on the outside, but other people weren't aware of it, even though they themselves were taking part in this transformation. Women had changed the way they dressed. Their shoulders looked more powerful now, stiffened inside with special little pads, and their skirts were shorter, making their calves look more angular. Even bread baked in tins had sharper edges, as if to make your tongue bleed.

All this worried him, because he had just bought the stone for a new house (the stone too was different, more rectangular than before) that was to be built up the hill from the old one.

He heard on the radio that an astronomer had discovered a new planet, and ever since he had worried about it endlessly – that somewhere far out in space the planet was revolving, small and icy, sure to be angular too. If it wasn't there before, but now was, that meant that even things that should always stay the same did in fact change. What's the good of a world that keeps changing like that – how can one go on calmly living in it?

In spite of his worries he started building the house. A diviner found water for him and they began by digging a new well. They had to dig deep, so water flowing from the melting snows wouldn't mix with the clean water, as had happened with the old well. They had a hard time digging, and extracted some large red stones from the ground that lay drying in the sun like dead animals. It was a sad sight. He promised the stones that he would use them to lay the foundations of the house and thus put them back where they came from.

They wanted to have a child, but his wife's womb remained empty. He told her not to worry, because once the house was built the child would come of its own accord. But when he was left alone he had gloomy thoughts. He was tormented by the existence of that planet, although he couldn't even remember what it was called. He worked all day, cutting the rafters for the roof. He ran his fingers along them, but they were rough and chafed his skin. The bricks, badly fired perhaps, kept crumbling, scattering dust on the new floors. Water flowed down from the mountains and through the house, and the ceramic drainpipes didn't help. But in spite of all this he believed that through hard work and resourcefulness a person can cope with anything. So he left the rafters imperfectly cut, plastered the walls roughly, and their neighbour, the wig-maker, advised him to forget about the drainpipes and let the water

run through the house, just let it flow through the cellars and on down the stone steps each spring. Make an outlet for it, she said, cut holes in the foundations, let it flow into the pond. And so he did. But the whole time he never stopped thinking about that planet. What sort of a world is it if a new heavenly body can appear at any time? If you aren't aware of something, does that mean it doesn't exist? If a person becomes aware of something, does that knowledge change him? Can a planet change the world?

While he was laying the roof tiles, he started to have terrible dreams. In them, the valley was different, darker, and the trees in it were bigger, but there weren't any houses among them, just waist-high grass. The stream had dried up, the mountain peaks were blunted and looked squat, as if old and bald. There were no roads or people. In his dream he came to the place that was dear to him and looked for his wife there, and even his children, yes, once upon a time he had had some children. But there was no one there, and he was a stranger even to himself; he looked at his hands but they were someone else's hands, someone he didn't know. He suffered in this dream, because he felt as if he had gone astray for ever, as if he were lost like a small child; he not only felt that he didn't know the way, but that the way itself simply didn't exist. He woke up trembling and examined the whole dream from a distance, image by image, trying to find the most terrifying moment of all in order to make himself come to terms with it, and use his powers of reasoning to show up the senselessness of the dream. But he couldn't find the right moment – it was all terrifying, for the simple reason that it made no sense.

And so it went on, even when his wife finally became pregnant and started getting up several times a night to relieve herself. He was awoken by her shuffling about in her slippers on

the new, spruce-scented floors, and then he would fall asleep again and dream the same thing over and over. On the day their son was born, he had an even more terrifying dream: in it, there were some red fly agaric toadstools lying on the table. His wife was frying them in a great big pan and feeding them to their defenceless child. And he was watching this scene without a single thought in his head, no warning of death. The child died and shrank to the size of a doll; he carried it into the garden and buried its naked pink body in a hole. He felt such acute pain that he woke up and had to check whether his son was breathing, whether the dream had broken through its hazy borders and become reality.

He suffered like this for a long time, fearing every evening and night. He felt only half alive because of these dreams.

'Have you heard about the new planet, Father?' he asked the priest, who came each Sunday from Königswald to say mass.

The priest was unaware of it.

'How do you know about it, Frost?' he asked, intrigued.

'It was on the radio.'

'Which radio station do you listen to?'

Like everyone in the village Franz Frost listened to Radio Vienna.

'Don't listen to that channel, they're always making things up. Why not listen to Radio Berlin instead?'

'But we always listen to the weather forecast on Radio Vienna.'

'Maybe so,' replied the priest.

When it was time for him to go, Franz plucked up the courage and said, 'I'm having dreams that aren't mine. They're stopping me from getting on with my life.'

The priest from Königswald stared at some point on the crown of Franz's head and replied, 'Can dreams really be "mine"?'

So Franz Frost got no help from the priest. It was as if they thought quite differently, despite belonging to the same church, despite gazing at the same icons, including that same round frame around the Virgin Mary and the saints.

He would have to cope on his own. He sawed the stump off a huge fallen ash tree, stripped off the bark, and made himself a wooden hat. He carved a hollow for his head, and left a brim around the sides. He polished it inside and out and lined it with wool. He made it so perfectly that from a distance it was hard to tell that it wasn't a shop-bought hat made of felt. After all, he was a master craftsman. Only from close up did the grain of the wood show. His wife noticed this eccentric new headgear, of course, but maybe she didn't know what to say. He would have replied (for he had prepared a clever answer) that it was to protect him from the newly discovered planet, which he didn't know by name; the planet that was sending down powerful nightmares that wore you out and exhausted your mind until it grew weak, and then you had nothing to hold on to and went mad.

Thanks to the wooden hat his life improved a bit. He planted an apple tree at the spot in the garden where he buried his dead child in his dreams each night. But he never did taste its apples, because the war came and he was drafted into the Wehrmacht. Apparently it was the hat that killed him, because he refused to swap it for a helmet.

His wife and his child

The woman with no name, whose special feature was a hairdo full of ringlets, the wife of Franz Frost, whose special feature was a wooden hat to counteract planetary influences, was sweeping

the excess limestone grouting from the front steps. The new house stood behind her, silent in the sunshine. It was young and did not yet have a story to tell. Her husband was with their small son by the pond behind the house. Somewhere far off to the west the war had begun.

Then from the direction of the sun someone came towards her. She raised her head and saw that it was her son. At the same time she could hear the child's voice from behind the house, so she froze on the spot, rigid with fear.

'Where is your son, my brother? I'd like to see him,' said the child.

She let him into the house and told him to sit at the table just as she always told her child to. This one, too, obeyed her.

'I know who you are,' she said, and tied his leg to the table with the belt of her apron. Then she ran to the pond and stammered out the whole story to her husband. They stood face to face, staring each other in the eye, but they couldn't see inside each other, they couldn't see their thoughts or their fears or anything else. They could only examine each other and go on waiting for the first word to be uttered. As they were standing there their son, who had heard everything, spoke out, though he couldn't understand much yet – or so they thought. 'Where is he? Is he waiting for me in the kitchen? Does he really look just like me? Can I go and see him?'

And he ran uphill towards the house, with his parents after him. They found the little boy tied to the table and stared for some time at both faces, both children – the familiar one that was their flesh and blood, and the other that was identical but alien. Their son kissed the boy on both cheeks, just as they had taught him to kiss his aunts and uncles, and the other child returned his kiss. They looked like twin brothers, eager to play, keen to run behind the house where raspberries and luxuriant

gooseberries grew, eager to skip along the cold stones in the stream, or play hide-and-seek – the burdock leaves always guaranteed the best hiding place.

They had no choice – they had to untie the visitor's leg and the boys ran outside at once, then vanished from the parents' sight into the tall grass beneath the apple and plum trees. Their reedy voices floated up over the garden of their neighbour the wig-maker.

'Do you know what it is?' Franz asked his wife.

He didn't ask 'who' but 'what'. In such situations, when your heart is thumping and your hands are shaking, when your head is strangely empty and you don't know what to do – whether to stay put or to run away, or whether to pretend nothing has actually happened – you never ask 'who', but always 'what'. 'What' is after all greater than 'who', and covers a wider range of possibilities. It's the same with God – you never ask who He is, only what He is.

Franz's wife burst into tears and wiped her eyes on a checked handkerchief that she always carried in her apron.

Their child came home in the afternoon, with grass seeds in his hair. He was tired and fell asleep at the table during dinner. They didn't ask about the other child, about where he was sleeping and whose son he was.

Then Franz went off to the war, which had been caused by the newly discovered planet. He went the day after the workmen had finished laying the roof tiles. So now his house had a roof.

In summer mushrooms appeared in the meadows. There were no potatoes left in the cellars, the cabbages had rotted, the apples had dried up, the walnuts had been eaten, and the fields and vegetable patches were only just putting out shoots. There was nothing but rhubarb for compote and cake.

Franz Frost's wife took her son by the hand and went to the meadows by the forest. There they picked wonderfully smooth mushrooms out of the grass. *Agaricus campestris*, the meadow mushroom, feels nice to touch and loves the caress of human fingers. When rubbed, its white skin smells of aniseed. Its pink or coffee-coloured gills look like flower petals. You can't resist touching it and stroking it before slicing it up and throwing it into the frying pan.

They threw the round, white mushrooms into a wicker basket, and the child was clever enough to distinguish them from the equally white puffballs, because puffballs are rough as a cow's tongue – the Frosts' child knew this much. But one thing he didn't know was that on the shady edges of the meadows the meadow mushroom's doppelgänger sometimes grows. The *Amanita verna*, brother of the albino *Amanita phalloides*, a loner that grows in the scrub on a stout stalk, is the death cap of the meadows. It smells sweet and watches the herds of meadow mushrooms from afar, like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

When they got home, Franz Frost's wife fried the mushrooms in a little fat, and the amanita's beautiful, finely chopped body also found its way into the pot, where its distinctive features disappeared in the sour cream. She laid the table and served the mushrooms with buckwheat. The child didn't want to eat, so she had to feed him. One for Daddy at the war, she said, one for our neighbour the wig-maker, one for your favourite dog, one for the people in the village, one for the priest at Königswald, one for the little kittens who've just been born in the barn, one for the whole world, let it not fall into madness. The child's mouth was reluctant to open.

During the night he began to vomit. In the morning, terrified by his condition, Mrs Frost carried him in her arms to the village, where the people who lived in the mansion took him by car

to the hospital in Neurode. They pumped his stomach, but it was no good. On the fifth day the child died.

Several telegrams went looking for Franz Frost at the front, but they never found him.

Amanita verna in sour cream

half a kilo of mushrooms
three hundred grams of butter
one small onion
half a glass of sour cream
two tablespoons of flour
salt, pepper, caraway seed

Simmer the finely chopped amanitas for about ten minutes with the onion fried in butter, the salt, caraway seed and pepper. Stir the sour cream into the flour and add to the mushroom mixture. Serve with potatoes or buckwheat.

The ways Marta might die

From above the woods hazy white clouds drifted down over the valley, and it began to rain. Marta was rolling out pastry on the shabby old oilcloth. Beneath her rolling-pin the ball of dough turned into a flat sheet, then she cut little circles out of it with a glass. I watched her hands and the concentration on her face. It had gone dark in her small, low kitchen and the rain was beating against the rhubarb leaves outside. Marta's old radio was mumbling so quietly that it was incomprehensible. How will death enter her body? I was wondering.

Through her eyes? Marta will look at something dark, unidentifiable, damp and sticky and will no longer be able to avert her gaze. That dark, sodden image will enter her brain and smother it. And that will be her death.

Through her ears? She'll start to hear a strange, dead sound that will drone in her head, low, vibrating, always at the same pitch, the opposite of music. Because of it she won't be able to sleep and she won't be able to live.

Or through her nose? When she senses that her body no longer smells, that her skin is becoming papery and is only absorbing light from the outside like a plant, but exuding nothing. Worriedly, she'll sniff at her hands, her armpits and feet, but they'll have become dry and sterile, because smell, the most volatile sense of all, is the first to disappear.

Or through her mouth? Death will shove the words back into her throat and brain. The dying don't feel like speaking, they're too preoccupied. Whatever would they speak about, what would they hand down to other generations? Nothing but banal nonsense, common platitudes. What sort of person is concerned about sending a message to humanity in the final moments of their life? No words of wisdom at the end are worth as much as the silence over there, on the other side, at the beginning.

Death can also enter through the mouth in another way – Marta could eat a maggoty apple, one of those dark red ones from her old orchard, an apple with a white embryo of death inside. Death would be let in this way, and as there is no great difference between the flesh of an apple and human flesh, death would consume her from the inside. There would be nothing left of her but a brittle empty shell that would crack and crumble the next time she tugged at the gate with the stiff catch.

I watched Marta out of the corner of my eye; now she was putting a spoonful of rosehip jelly on each little circle and

pinching the pastry cases shut, to make crescent shapes with crinkly edges. I had brought my small Ukrainian stove so that we wouldn't have to get a fire going in her ramshackle kitchen range. Suddenly the sunlight broke through the windows, although it was still raining. We put the tarts into the stove on a tin tray and went outside.

R. was standing on our terrace pointing at the sky. A rainbow hung over the hills. It straddled our car, as if it had just given birth to it.

The smell

Everything bad happens in winter. In winter R. had an accident. He skidded on the snowy mountain bends and ran into a lorry. He hit his head on the steering-wheel and broke his nose. The car's long, nickel-plated bonnet saved his life. It was the kind of accident where you say nothing happened.

But something did happen. Although his nose healed and the stitches no longer show, ever since the accident R. has been aware of a strange smell. The smell appears suddenly, in waves of varying intensity. He's most strongly aware of it in a particular spot on the way down to the pond. There are nettles growing there, around an ash tree, so he sniffed the nettle leaves and the bark of the tree, but he couldn't find anything. He even thought the smell might be coming from the water – it was neither nice nor nasty, a bit sweet and a tiny bit sour. But it wasn't the water either. Once he found the smell in a glass of brandy, then in some coffee and then on a sweater that had been left lying in a cupboard full of winter clothes. Finally he discovered that the smell was not a feature of one thing or another, that its source was not a particular object – in fact it had no source at all, it just attached itself to

things once in a while, quite by chance, and that's why it was so hard to identify. It isn't like anything else, R. said once, but later on he had the opposite impression, as if it were actually present in all other smells, and his broken nose and scarred olfactory cells had become sensitive to it, had discovered it and remembered it for ever. And that's the nasty thing – not being able to identify something that you can smell, something that attracts your attention while it's there. It's torture not being able to pinpoint the source, not being able to understand it, or interpret it. Some insects smell like that and traces of them are left behind on berries; the smell of a knife blade as it cuts a tomato; the smell of petrol mixed with the odour of fermented cheese; my old perfume inside an unfashionable handbag; iron filings; the lead from a pencil; a new CD; the surface of the window-pane; spilt cocoa powder.

I have often seen R. stop in the middle of what he's doing and sniff the air. His face becomes concentrated. He sniffs his palms, and suddenly in the middle of a conversation he starts sniffing a button that's come off. Or he rubs wormwood leaves between his fingers and finally thinks he's discovered what it is. But he never has.

We have both guessed that it's the smell of death, and that R. first sensed it when his car hit the lorry, in that split second when anything could have happened and there was no going back. It was a moment of great potency, loaded with possibilities, like the gram of stuff that becomes an atom bomb. That's how it smells, and it's the smell of death.

R. keeps worrying that he'll go on smelling it for ever, and that never again will he innocently enter the snow-covered hairpin bends between Wałbrzych and Jedlina, or drive through the crossroads by the Town Station unaware, or even reach for any of my mushroom dishes without thinking. He knows, and I know that he knows.

The vision of Kummernis from Hilaria

Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat

I was lying on my back, reciting my final prayers before sleep. Suddenly I felt myself rise up, as if I had become weightless, and when I looked down I could see my body lying on its back in bed, its lips still moving, as if it hadn't noticed that I was no longer in it. And I discovered that I could move about in space. I was able to move just by thinking about it; even the slightest desire allowed me to move, so I raised myself still higher and saw the convent from above, the wooden shingle of the roof, and the stone coping of the chapel tower. After a while, from an even greater height, I saw the whole world; it was slightly convex and steeped in darkness; only from somewhere beyond its limits did long rays of sunlight illuminate it, casting black shadows into the darkness. Those different gradations of darkness troubled me and filled me with sadness, for I knew that the light existed, but it was hidden. And as soon as I thought about the light, I saw it – at first it was pale as a narcissus, weak as mist, but it began to grow steadily stronger and I was afraid I would be blinded by it. I realized that this must be heaven and God, but I was surprised – for my mind was alert – that I remained alone and had no guides from anywhere, since in proximity to God there live hosts of angels and all manner of resplendent beings. Then I felt something like a wind, neither warm, nor hot, that wrapped itself around me as if I had fallen into the sphere of a great whirlwind. This force was pushing me away from the light; between me and the light there was an invisible, yet palpable border. And although I wanted to cross it and was drawn to the light like never before, I was weak and

lacked the strength. Until a voice appeared in my head that could have been my own voice as much as anyone else's, and the voice said to me: 'This is time.' At once I realized the whole truth about the world – that it is time that prevents the light from getting through to us. Time keeps us apart from God and as long as we are within time, we are imprisoned, doomed to fall prey to darkness. Only death releases us from its shackles, but at that point we have nothing left to say about life. Then I was overcome with sadness, although my eyes could see the vast expanse of light. I desired nothing else but to die for ever, and maybe I did die, for suddenly the wind of time vanished and I was plunged into the light. I could say nothing about being in the light, for along with me all words had disappeared. I could no longer even think, for there were no thoughts either. Nor could I exist, here or anywhere else, for neither here nor there existed any more, and no motion existed. In this state there were no qualities, good or bad, and I do not know how long it lasted, for there were neither moments nor millennia.

I would have remained like that eternally, neither alive nor dead, if I had not suddenly felt a yearning for the world. At once an image as brightly coloured as a painting unfurled before me. I couldn't tear my eyes away from it.

Seen from above, the world was full of people sleeping. It was a far more densely populated world than the one I was familiar with, for everyone whom we thought had died was there too. I realized that it was Judgement Day and the angels were already starting to scroll up the furthest edges of the world, as if they were the fringes of an enormous carpet. From above and below came the rumble of a great battle – the clash of weapons and the drumming of horses' hooves, but I couldn't see who was fighting whom, for my eyes were fixed on the Earth unfurled before

me. Some people were already waking up, rubbing their eyes and staring into the sky. But their attention was weak and unstable – they didn't know what they were looking at. I could see mountains that were shaking as if with fear, and their contours were blurring in the thinning air. The sun had stopped at its zenith and was illuminating the air with a bright and burning light. The grass began to burn on the steppes and the water began to boil in the streams. Animals emerged out of the forests and, heedless of their natural enemies, came down into the clamour of the valleys. People also came marching along the dried up roads to some appointed place. They came briskly and confidently, no one dragged their feet. The sky was not smooth and blue, but seething and swirling. Plants were turning to stone beneath it.

And then I understood with all my heart that I was watching the very last moments of time, that I was destined to witness the end.

And I realized that our Judgement will be an awakening, for throughout our lives we are just dreaming, imagining that we are alive. But there was once a time when we really were alive, then we died, and now we are dead. And these dream-lives of ours that we take as real mean nothing to God, because nothing has really happened in them. We shall not have to answer for our dreams – the only thing we are responsible for is the life that we can't remember, for death has put us to sleep. Only that forgotten existence was real; in it we either sinned or were virtuous. We do not know what we shall awaken to – hell fire or eternal life in the light.

Once again I must repeat it: our world is populated by the sleeping, who have died and are dreaming that they are alive. That is why there are more and more people in the world, for it is populated by the sleeping dead who keep growing in number,

while the real people living for the first time are few. In all this confusion none of us knows or can possibly know if he is someone who is only dreaming life, or really living it.

Corpus Christi

Marta said that you should not take what you see too seriously. She said it as we were looking out of the window at a Corpus Christi procession that went marching by, across the fields where the flax has been sown. The priest came first, and after him two banners and a small group of people. Lower down along the crisply green meadow ran a dog, as if joining in at a distance with this unexpected crowd walking across the fields.

I don't know why she told me this; she was supposed to be on her way out and was already holding the handle of the open door.

That evening I remembered her remark. Eyes are constructed to see nothing but still photographs from a living, moving film, and whatever they see they pin down and kill. When I look at something, I believe that what I'm seeing is fixed, but that's a false image of the world. The world is constantly in motion, always vibrating. It has no zero point that can be committed to memory and understood. Our eyes take pictures that are nothing but images, mere outlines. The landscape is the greatest illusion of all, because there is nothing constant about it. You remember a landscape as if it were a picture. Your memory creates postcard images, but doesn't really comprehend the world at all. That's why a landscape is so affected by the mood of the person looking at it. In it a person sees his own inner, transitory moments. Wherever he looks, he sees nothing but himself. That was what Marta wanted to tell me.

A dream

I dream I am able to enter people through their mouths.

People are built like houses inside – they have stairwells, spacious halls, vestibules that are always too weakly lit to count the doors into the rooms, row upon row of apartments, damp chambers, slimy, tiled bathrooms with cast-iron baths, steps with handrails taut as veins, artery-like corridors, joint-like landings, passages, guest rooms, draughty chambers into which a sudden current of warm air flows, closets, twists and turns and cubby-holes, and larders full of forgotten supplies. I can move about inside them with impunity; in fact I am alone there.

From the inside these houses seem uninhabited. In the bedrooms the beds are made and covered in willow green bedspreads; the pillowcases are as tight as membranes, the curtains are open, the deep pile of the carpet is undisturbed, and there's a comb on the dressing-table. I cannot sit down on the bed or pick up the comb in my hand. I'm disembodied, but I can see everything, and I can peep into every nook and cranny.

I know that I'm inside people – I recognize it from tiny details. One of the walls in the corridor is the colour of meat and is throbbing gently. Sometimes from the depths a distant, steady rumble reaches my ears, sometimes my foot slips on something hard and veiny. If I stare at the sideboard in the kitchen for long enough, I can see a shapeless, spongy, living structure shining inside it.

The monster

The first time I encountered Whatsisname he was standing on our terrace with his mouth open, pointing into his rotting maw,

looking like a shaggy, ugly little gnome, the sort that spring up by the hundreds under the amanita caps each summer.

'Aaa,' he said, and then I saw a white pill on his tongue.

We stood facing each other on the terrace in the empty valley. Behind him was the sun, behind me the shade. My only concern was not to let him into the hall, for then he would sit there incubating like a disease until evening, saying 'aaa' with his mouth open – which is not something I understand. So I withdrew to the threshold and barred his entry. Panicking, I started wondering how to get to the phone without letting him out of my sight. I suppose I was afraid of him. Then he made a gesture as if raising a cup to his lips, and I realized that 'aaa' meant 'Give me some water.' I told him to wait and ran to the kitchen for a glass. When I came back he was still standing there, mouth gaping, staring at the picture of a blue-eyed dragon that protects the house. The pill vanished into the darkness of his gnome-like body.

'A monster,' he said, pointing at the dragon.

Just after the war, when there was still a pond in the village, a monster appeared in it. It was huge, the size of a large cow, and the shape of a crocodile, with horny claws and a muzzle full of teeth sharp as knives. It ate all the fish left behind by the Germans, all the reeds and all the rushes, and then it began to prey on sheep, dogs, hens and geese. At night it would come out on to the road by the church and shamble along the asphalt towards Nowa Ruda, and in the morning, to their horror, people would discover its tracks in their backyards. Ducks would suddenly disappear, nothing was left of the geese but violently twisted orange feet, and disgorged ram's horns lay scattered about on the edge of the pool. The local authorities were busy with other things – apportioning land, tracking down *agents provocateurs*, and founding cooperatives – so the men from the

village decided to take action themselves. They threw carbide and rat poison into the water, and then a rusty old grenade that exploded. After that the pond looked like a puddle of dirty, poisoned water, but all in vain – the next night the monster ate a bullock, and it looked as if it would wreak vengeance. So the men sharpened some long poles, nailed logs together to make rafts and sailed out into the middle of the pond. Again and again they jabbed at the surface, stabbing the muddy waters methodically, but the holes they made instantly closed over and the water remained just as impenetrable as before. The third time they decided to apply technology and brought in a huge dynamo with a crank handle that generated an electric current. From it they extended wires, encircling the entire pool with them like a net. Then they took turns to crank the handle, lashing the monster with electric shocks. Its great body writhed in pain beneath the surface, making the water spill on to the shores, until finally it was still. That evening the villagers drank until dawn.

But a few days later the monster came to, and dragged an incautious woman under the water in retaliation. Nothing was left of her but a tin bucket on the edge of the pond.

That was the beginning of the end of the monster. Everyone agreed – you can destroy plants and slaughter animals, but you can't take people's lives. The monster had broken the rules. The authorities came, the border guards and the Tatra Highland troopers, and the sappers too. They opened the pond up into the stream with a huge explosion and the water poured out of it. At the bottom of the pond lay the monster, wounded and weak, but still alive. Then the soldiers got out their heavy machine-guns and set them up by the waterside. The officer gave the signal and bursts of gunfire slashed through the monster's body. Despite its wounds it still tried to attack, and the people watching scuttled away screaming. New bands of ammunition were quickly loaded

and the hideous body was riddled with holes like a sieve. And that was the end of the monster.

After telling me this Whatsisname went off to Nowa Ruda, pushing along his old German bike, but in the evening he dropped by again, because he had remembered that that wasn't quite the end of the story.

For the next few nights the villagers heard a dismal wailing from the woods on the Czech side of the border. Some creature was crying in the darkness in a voice so chilling that it made your flesh creep. A month later, in the dried-up pond they found the dead body of a female monster, who had come through the woods and meadows and over the state border in search of her beloved, and at the site of his terrible death she herself had died.

Rain

On my name-day it began to rain, so we moved the chairs into the hall to sit it out until the rain stopped. But it never ended; it came streaming down relentlessly, obscuring the horizon. The hall gradually became soaking wet, I really don't know why; maybe the water was seeping through the walls. Or maybe it was the dogs' fault – they kept marking the floor with their five-spot footprints. Outside the hay was quietly getting wet, and the slugs were rejoicing in their underground, under-leaf world and preparing for a festival – Dampness Day.

A couple of kilometres down the road towards Nowa Ruda there's a strange house, or rather it isn't the house that's strange, but its location. It stands in a narrow valley between dark green wooded peaks. It's lower than any other house in the neighbourhood and can't actually be seen from anywhere, except perhaps from the top of those peaks. The stream laps against it

on both sides, licking its damp walls. As he stood in the doorway staring at the rain R. began to tell the story of the slug family that lives there: a big, tough brown father, a slightly smaller mother, and two children. In the evenings they sit silently at the table in the gloom – there's no light, because the dampness prevents the electricity from working. Their dark, shiny skin only reflects the weak gleam of the darkening day. At night the whole family goes to sleep on the floor in the corner. Four bodies stuck to one another, gently throbbing to the rhythm of their sluggish breathing. In the morning they glide off into the lush wet greenery, leaving slimy trails behind them. They bring home rotting strawberries coated in a pale film of mould and chew them in silence. Water oozes on to the floors, covering them in a shiny lacquer.

Neither of us was amused by this story. Instead we opened up bright computer worlds and disappeared into them. In the artificial sunlight of the screens our faces shone ghastly pale. Then we logged off and spent the evening playing patience: would it ever stop raining? Never ever. Through the window I could see Marta's house, lashed with rain. Perhaps I should go and get her, I thought; what could she be doing there all alone in the darkness? She was sure to have opened her wig chest and now she'd be weaving that dead headgear, of no use to anyone. She'd be plaiting strands of hair from strange women who have either died or are living somewhere on the other side of the world, travelling, ageing in old people's homes, their youth dried up inside them like a scab.

As I was putting on my gumboots I noticed that the water in the pond was overflowing at the very spot R. had so carefully built up that spring. It was pouring between the concrete floodgates and had almost reached the footbridge. It was thick, red and muddy. It was no longer making its familiar murmuring sound, but droning, as if building up to a scream. In his yellow

gumboots and yellow mackintosh R. looked like a ghost as he ran helplessly along the embankment. I could see his fish in the dark red foaming eddies anxiously preparing for death. The delicate, languid carp, usually so idle, were now skimming along the stirred-up surface, silently snapping their jaws open and shut in amazement. Among them the trout were excited by the unexpected promise of a journey to the Nysa River, to the Oder, to the sea.

'I knew what you'd be doing,' I said as I came in.

Marta was sitting at the table spreading out her collection. She was unwrapping tresses of hair from their newspaper, and combing them through with her fingers. Then she began to wind the strands on to the weaving frame. I took off my gumboots and jacket; puddles of water poured off them.

'I can't ever remember so much water,' replied Marta. 'Or maybe there's something wrong with my memory.' She smiled at me. 'I want to give you a name-day present. I'm going to make you a wig, out of real hair, on silk, specially for your head.'

She picked up a skein of fair hair from the table and held it to my face, but she didn't like it and tried another. She told me to choose the hair for myself, but I still couldn't bring myself to touch it. She told me to sit down, took out a faded exercise book and a Bic ballpoint that I had given her, and began to measure my head, gently touching my temples and brow with the tips of her fingers. I felt the same pleasant shudder as when Mama used to take me to her dressmaker, Mrs Poniewierka, and I had to stand still while she took my measurements. She would build a space around me out of centimetres and the nips and tucks of the pattern, kneading it with her hands, wrapping it around my waist and shoulders. She hardly touched me at all, but my skin still responded, with a muffled shudder of pleasure. I'd be lulled to sleep standing up.

And now Marta was repeating this ritual. I felt embarrassed by the pleasure of it and closed my eyes. You have a large head. You have a small head. I don't know what Marta said.

The flood

Last night there was a storm. The dogs kept barking anxiously so we woke up at dawn and saw that despite the rain, the daylight had come.

The pond had vanished. The stream was flowing where it used to be, but now it was more powerful, rough and angry. There were no floodgates, no footbridge, none of the sheets of metal that R. had used yesterday in a desperate attempt to strengthen the edges. There were no graceful carp, or impatient trout. Our pond had run away. It had let itself be seduced by the water that was pouring in from all sides and had flowed down across the meadow, along the edge of the forest, through Pietno, into another river, and on into the Nysa. It could be in Kłodzko by now, maybe even further away. The aristocratic carp, unaccustomed to such a violent journey, would have got stuck in the twists and turns of the river, or been crushed by the current in the waterlogged undergrowth. There is no pond. R. is eating beetroot soup and staring out of the window. Marta is emptying some very full rainwater barrels. I wave to her; she waves back and then disappears into her little house.

After dinner R. went back to the story of the slug family. He described the activities of the master of the house. At night the father slug glides through the grass to the road, rests a while, and then sets off for people's homes. There he eats the wet lettuce in people's gardens and the tender young courgette shoots. He enjoys gnawing holes in them, but it's not out of malice – it is his form of

creativity. He revels in the holes and the rain. But what he likes most of all is bonfire ash that has turned to mud. He wallows about in it, and goes home dirty, drunk on the damp remains of the fire. His wife silently reproaches him – she was dying of worry.

Nails

Marta and I went to Nowa Ruda to get nails. The cars moved slowly, crawling along in single file, because the flood had torn up part of the highway. From the bus stop in the village we picked up Krysia, who was wearing men's gumboots and getting soaked in the rain. As soon as she got in she took them off and put on a pair of shoes she had in a carrier bag.

All the little streets along the river were caked in mud. The buildings were smeared in the stuff up to the ground floor windows. The shopkeepers were busy drying out their wares. The owner of the second-hand shop was hanging out used clothes that had already been through a lot in their ragged lives – moving house, changing cupboards, broken washing-machines, overheated irons, their owners getting fatter, sometimes even dying – and now a river run wild at night.

Someone had arranged pairs of trainers on the sandbags, dozens of identical Adidases and Nikes. Their laces hung down to the water like wicks, and their garish colours blazed against the grey of the muddied walls.

Krysia thanked us for the lift and went on her way, straightening her lemon-yellow jumper. We parked past the bridge by the jeweller's and bought some pickling cucumbers. Then that lunatic everyone knows came up to us – the Prophet, the Clairvoyant – a shaggy fellow in a poncho made out of an old blanket. He smiled at Marta; they must have known each other.

'How are you?' he asked.

'As ever,' said Marta.

He looked at her in disbelief. 'As ever?'

At that moment I thought I saw his face cloud over, as if he were about to burst into tears. Marta told him to take care or something of the kind, but he took a cucumber from the scales, turned and walked away.

The clairvoyant

That man had a beautiful, exotic name – Leo. And that's what he looked like too, like a lion.

He had let his hair and beard grow long, and one harsh winter they'd both gone grey, God knows why.

Leo the clairvoyant lived on a state pension because, although it's hard to believe it, once upon a time as a young man he had an accident in a mine and lay buried for two days almost one hundred metres down in a hot, black hole, like a mother's womb, painfully conscious the whole time, his bright spirit shining around his head in a phosphorescent halo. He was sure he would die, but he didn't. The rescue team pulled him out, and then he spent a long time in hospital. After it was all over he got down to real life – reading books from dawn till dusk. First he read whatever came his way, but in time he was drawn to unpublished manuscripts that he got from a semi-legal mail-order bookshop in Kraków. These included the writings of Besant, Blavatsky and Ossowiecki, muddled reports of spiritualist seances, Hindu and Jewish cabbalas and prophecies of all kinds. One day he came across the address of the Astrologers' Society in Bydgoszcz, and from the book they sent him, he taught himself to read horoscopes one Christmas. From then on nothing gave

him so much pleasure as immersing himself in the intricate sequences of numbers printed in books of ephemerides. Sometimes he would pore over them until dawn, and at sunrise he would start to see the future. It was always terrible – dead and empty. There were never any people or animals in it. He could see it springing up in the gloomy corners of the room and spreading outside, into the stairwell of his block, on to the lawns in front of it, into the streets and the marketplace in Nowa Ruda. When he went for a quick walk in the evenings he would brush against it, and it would leave a strange metallic smell on the sleeves of his overcoat.

He became a proper clairvoyant when his wife died. It looked as if it was she who had kept him down to earth and grounded his every thought, his every presentiment. She was like a powerful atmospheric depression that squeezes every puff of smoke out of chimneys and casts winter smog over cities. She controlled his thoughts by magic, forcing them to concentrate on queuing in the shops, weeding the beetroots at the allotment and tossing the coal into the cellar. What's more, her voice used to follow him all round town. She would stick her head out of the window and call across the courtyard, 'Leee-o, Leee-o, Leo!' until all the children looked up and repeated after her, 'Leo, Leee-o, Leee-o!' She was a sorceress.

So when she died, suddenly it all went quiet, and images that had been suppressed for years began to surface in his head and spread like frost on a damp window-pane – they linked arms unexpectedly and made rings and fancy sequences; quite at random they built bewitching patterns that made perfect sense. This was real clairvoyance.

His clients were all women. Only once in his career as a clairvoyant did a man turn up to see him – a well-dressed older gentleman, bloated from a bad diet and, perhaps, from too much

vodka. He knew him by sight, but he couldn't help him much, because the old guy's problem was love, that most overrated of all emotions, and at best an absurd one anyway, arising as it did out of inner confusion. He was looking for his teenage lover, which was both funny and pitiful. Leo did not want to take this on at all, especially since the young girl had not left even the most trivial thing behind her, not a trace. But the man's despair was so affecting, he looked so pathetic in his stiff woollen overcoat with his felt hat pulled over his eyes, as if he was completely lost, even in his own clothes.

'Where is she? That's all I want to know,' he said.

Leo looked into the past. He saw the girl at once, because she was more restless and more conspicuous than other beings. She horrified him; she wasn't a teenage girl at all, or a woman – she wasn't even human. My God, Leo took serious fright, and only told the sad old man, 'She's here,' because he could see her in the present and the future too.

'In town?' said the man gladly and Leo saw his eyes for the first time – they were puffy and tear-stained.

'Somewhere in the neighbourhood.'

Before leaving the man furtively pressed a banknote into his hand.

'Please keep this a secret,' he requested.

There was no need to say that, thought Leo afterwards. You should never talk about such things. Who would believe it anyway? That you can see something that isn't there, and that a person may not necessarily be human through and through, that every decision you make is just an illusion. Thank God people have the capacity for disbelief – it is a truly bountiful gift from God.

The women were always more specific when they asked about love; they wanted to be hugged, to walk through the park arm in

arm, to bear someone's children, to wash windows on Saturdays and make soup for someone. When he closed his eyes he could see their lives; they didn't interest him and he found it hard to concentrate on the details that concerned them – whether their husband would be auburn-haired or dark, whether they'd have one or two children, a healthy body or a sick one, money or bare cupboards. But if he made an effort he could manage it. In his visions he counted children, peered into cupboards and inspected the hair colour of men in white T-shirts eating soup on Sundays. However, he found the women's lives touching. Sitting opposite him, gazing expectantly at his face, they were like timid creatures, deer, or hares in spring – gentle and shy, and at the same time extremely clever at dodging, escaping and hiding. Sometimes he thought of a woman's existence as a sort of mask that she puts on as soon as she's born, enabling her to go through life in camouflage, never fully revealing herself to anyone. He reckoned they didn't ask the questions they ought to ask.

He changed the money he earned through clairvoyance (which wasn't much) into dollars. He wanted to go to India, which he never managed to do, because India, like everything else, ceased to exist.

But first of all, he looked into many other people's futures, and they all merged together in his mind into one single, common future. He knew that the end of the world was coming, and that it wouldn't be long now – it was only a matter of calculations.

He saw a valley, over which hung a low, orange sky. All the lines of this world were indistinct and the shadows were blurred, cast by some alien light. In the valley there were no houses, no traces of humanity, not a single clump of nettles or a wild currant bush was growing. There was no stream, though the place

where one used to be was overgrown with thick, hard, tawny grass, like a scar. There was no day in this world, and no night either. The orange sky kept shining all the time – neither warm nor cold, motionless and indifferent. The hill was still covered in forest, but when he looked at it closely he could see that it was dead; at some point it had hardened and turned to stone. Pine-cones hung on the spruce trees, and their branches were still covered in ashen needles, because there was no wind to scatter them. He had a terrible foreboding that if any sort of movement were to occur in this landscape the forest would come crashing down and turn to dust.

This was how the end must look. No deluge, no rains of fire, no Auschwitz, no comet. This is how the world will look when God has deserted it, whoever he is. Like an abandoned house, everything coated in cosmic dust, muggy and steeped in silence. Everything living will congeal and grow mould in light that has no pulse and is therefore dead. In this spectral light everything will crumble.

The man who saw the end of the world every day lived calmly. From time to time he went to Kraków for books and gazed out of the train window at the passing scenery, mainly Upper Silesia and its temples of industry, then the fields in Opole county stretching to the horizon, neatly sown with rapeseed that blooms each year on the tenth of May. He had descriptions of all sorts of apocalyptic visions in his canvas rucksack, typed out hundreds of times, the pronouncements of the spirits on the collapse of civilization, visions of the Virgin Mary, and the abstruse poetry of Nostradamus.

Suddenly the plains ended and the mountains began. The train entered the spruce forest, pushed its way through stony ravines and wound through valleys until it reached the centre of Wałbrzych. Some people got out at the Town Station, but Leo

went on to the Main Station, because that's where he changed trains for Kłodzko.

Wałbrzych Main Station was dark and deserted, with a single kiosk where miners from the night shift bought cigarettes and condoms. At the bar they sold piroshki with bacon dripping and weak tea, brewed with difficulty in lukewarm water. The train to Kłodzko via Nowa Ruda was usually empty. Leo liked to find a seat on the upper deck to get a better view, because this was the most beautiful train route ever. It ran along tall viaducts across broad valleys, and along mountain slopes above villages and streams. At every turn, breathtaking new views unfolded, featuring the gentle line of the mountains, the silky sky, and ribbons of greenery. Down below, people were walking along the road, driving cows; dogs were running; a peasant burst into laughter; the little bells jingled on the sheep's necks; higher up a man with a rucksack went by and waved; smoke rose from the chimneys into the sky, and birds flew blithely west. In a train like that it's impossible to read – you simply have to look.

Leo began to write a book, and started with a title: *The End is Nigh*. It was about the end of the world, and included a thorough analysis of the heavens. The world would start to end on the second of April 1995, when Uranus would enter Aquarius, and it would end once and for all in August 1999, when the Sun, Mars, Saturn and Uranus would form a great cross in the sky. He wrote this book in the winter of 1980, when it wasn't yet clear what would happen in Poland. But when the strikes began, and the trams on strike in Wrocław were drawn up in the shape of an enormous cross, covering the entire city, Leo accepted that he might have made a mistake in his vigilant observations, or in his interpretation of the tiny little figures in the ephemerides, and that the end of the world might be coming sooner. Indeed he couldn't wait, and lived in a state of pure anticipation. He wore

out all his old shoes, his clothes tore at the seams, the elastic in his underpants broke, his socks were full of holes, and the heels became a very thin gauze of nylon threads with the hardened skin showing through. He kept no supplies, nothing at all for the future. The empty mayonnaise jars were begging to be filled with jam and preserves for the winter, and with stewed fruit just in case he were suddenly admitted to hospital. But the winter might not come, there might not be a next summer. The bread had to be eaten up to the last crumb, and the soap washed down to a thin flake that could then be used for laundry.

He predicted that there would be a great flood in the summer of 1993. Ice would suddenly melt in the north and the water in the oceans would rise. Holland would disappear underwater. The same would happen to Żuławy. It might be even worse, with nothing but plateaux and mountains left above the surface. Nowa Ruda would survive because it was high up. Then a war would break out in the Near East that would turn into world war over the following year. Once again armies would march across the waterlogged lowlands. The cathedral in Wrocław would become a mosque. Then, at the beginning of 1994, the sky would be dark for several days because of nuclear explosions. People would start to fall sick. Nothing would happen to Nowa Ruda, thank goodness.

Leo published the book himself, using money earned from clairvoyance, in 1990 when paper rationing ended. For three years he waited for the first signs of the end of the world, but they never came, despite all the jam-jars he emptied and the dry bread crusts he consumed. In the summer of 1993 there was a heatwave, and he took the terrible heat to be the beginning of the end, but it stopped when the season finished. The children went back to school, and people baked plum tarts and gathered the potato harvest as usual. In Leo's kitchen the gas boiler broke

and because it was cold and he needed hot water he had to fix it. As he was rummaging among its nozzles he had a chilling sense of futility. When the end of the world is nigh all activity becomes a form of sickness.

For Leo the world did end, however, on the fourteenth of November 1993, during the great conjunction of Uranus and Neptune in the eighteenth degree of Capricorn. He realized it one night as he was sitting in the bathtub – which was the only effective way of warming up his whole body quickly. That evening on television they said that some sect in Uruguay was expecting the world to end today. Then the Pope, with his right arm in a sling, blessed the world with his left hand, and the weather report included a blizzard warning. At the end a tired presenter appeared and as she was saying good night, she added in a sarcastic tone, 'Despite the pessimistic predictions of the Uruguayan sect the world has not yet ended.' At that moment Leo reckoned there were forty-five minutes left until the end of the world, one school lesson's worth, and he went to have a bath.

As he was sitting in the bathtub, the light in the bathroom went out, the television fell silent and icy water began to flow out of the tap. He froze in horror, but didn't even try to get help. Columns of figures from the ephemerides were racing through his head, along with a gloomy diagram of the configuration of the Sun. The pipes in the bathroom started blaring like the trumpets on Judgement Day, and Leo's naked body began to shiver. He thought of all his nearest and dearest – though they were distant, rather than near, as he had no one else in his life – and wondered what all the town's animals were doing, the dogs, cats, guinea-pigs and hamsters, whether they were afraid too, and whether animals would accompany people beyond this moment. He wondered whether a fiery sword would appear in each and

every home, even on the eleventh floor of tower blocks, and where the earth would be rent asunder, when there wasn't even room to park. Suddenly in the dark bathroom he had a clear vision of an image that had terrified him as a child: the dead rising from the earth, naked and sleepy, rubbing their eyes and raising their hands to their faces in the blinding sunlight; stone crosses shaking in the cemeteries and gravestones moving aside. An angel stands on the horizon, his beautiful face contorted with anger and disgust, while around his head a hurricane rages. That was the image in Leo's head.

The bathroom remained dark.

The roar of the pipes was making the walls tremble slightly. Leo's jaw began to shudder until he could hear his teeth chattering, but not out of fear. The only emotion he felt was disappointment. First it was faint, like the feeling at Christmas when his mother had bought him pyjamas instead of the longed-for rocking-horse, then it grew stronger and stronger, until finally it was unbearable. Was that how the end of the world was supposed to be? Darkness, and the pipes rumbling?

The man who predicted the end of the world – even if he might have got the exact date wrong – was at heart an optimist. He wanted to witness the whole thing, as if he himself had summoned it up, and even now he was remembering a rare conjunction of Neptune and Uranus, when they narrowly scrape past each other, causing a clash of energies.

All he wanted now was to look at the sky, to see if it had been extinguished, to see if the planets had stopped orbiting, if galaxies had collided in a headlong dive and the apocalyptic dust solidified at zero degrees Kelvin. He clamped his shuddering jaws shut and got up from the stone-cold water.

And then, in the single most incomprehensible moment of Leo's life, the naked light bulb flared on, the tap wheezed and

gushed hot water, and the voice of the television rang out from the sitting-room, as if the TV and its million faces was the only life form to have risen from the dead. Startled by this unforeseen turn of events, Leo froze with his foot on the edge of the bathtub and blinked as his eyes adapted to the sudden light. Clouds of steam were forming condensation on the broken mirror. The faded towels hung motionless on their pegs just as indifferently as before.

Leo got out of the bath, opened the door on to the corridor and listened. Someone was shuffling down the stairwell. From the neighbours above came the sound of monotonous mechanical music. Leo crossed the sitting-room and opened the door on to the balcony, so preoccupied that he didn't even notice the cold. He saw the town before him, just the same as it had been yesterday, or an hour ago. There were lights shining and a droning sound coming from below. But nothing seemed the same any more. In this safe, familiar view he could sense a falseness. He sniffed the air, as if expecting to smell burning. After several minutes, as his body went numb with cold, he realized that the world had in fact ended, although it had retained the outward appearance of continuity. So that was what the end was like.

For some reason people are unable to imagine endings, not only the ends of momentous events, but even of the most minor ones. Perhaps the very effort of imagining something has the effect of exhausting reality; perhaps it doesn't want to be imagined, maybe it wants to be free, like a rebellious teenager, and that's why it's always different from how we imagine it.

From the next day Leo began to live in a world that no longer existed, a pure illusion, a dream born of instinct, a habit of the senses.

It wasn't at all hard to do; it was easier than the old life. Nowadays going into town was like stepping into a mist, like

going on stage. He made faces at people and laughed when they looked at him in amazement. He even allowed himself to pinch the occasional item from the deli, but not much, just little things, because otherwise it would have felt wrong somehow. He stopped bothering about his clothes, only remembering not to freeze. He put on odd shoes, and when he accidentally spilled oil on his coat he swapped it for a blanket that he cut a hole in and wore like a poncho. As he had thrown all his ephemerides and other calculations into a corner he had a lot of time; he used to sit in the park by the river and stare at every stone, every wall, watching for signs of disintegration, and he found them all right. The river changed colour almost every day – one day it was brown, dark as coffee, the next pink as champagne. The stones were starting to wrinkle. The little bridge was crumbling, and Leo waited impatiently for some of the phantom people to fall into the unreal water. He would walk among the stalls at the vegetable market and take the ripest fruits from their baskets. Some people shouted at him, others didn't. He would accost girls at the gate, more for a joke than anything else, or to conquer his fear of alluring women in tight skirts, but he didn't really want to do anything with any of these non-existent people.

He also used to stare at the sky, which made him feel nostalgic; every day it looked different, like the coloured river, because the stars were moving about in a chaotic, unpredictable way. He spent hours looking for Mars, because it wasn't where it ought to be. The Milky Way had become almost impossible to see. Above Mount Anna a bright light would sometimes rise, but he didn't know what it could be. Sometimes he saw phantom people looking at the sky too, but they didn't seem worried. They would kiss in the moonlight, although from that day it had become hard to predict the moon's phases any more – it just did what it wanted.

Leo would go to sleep and dream that he was walking about the town, pinching fruits from the stalls and watching the river.

Sometimes he would stick his finger in a wall and dig about in its warm, decaying interior. The stone would give way beneath his fingertip, crumbling and yielding to his touch, leaving a hole that would never heal up again. Once he thought one of the houses by the river had wilted. It looked as if it had become brittle and defenceless, then sunk under its own weight and quietly lain down on the ground. Only one wall was left, which was being held up by the neighbouring building. The phantom people didn't seem to have noticed. They went past the empty spot as if nothing had ever been there, as if the spot where the house should have been had grown over.

This feeling of sad amazement made him start wondering about himself too – about whether he existed or not. He touched his hands and face, but he couldn't bring himself to touch his stomach. He was afraid his finger would be tempted to start drilling a hole in there, too, that would never heal up, and he'd be stuck with it for ever.

He sometimes came across people whose faces looked familiar, though less and less often. The lady selling vegetables was replaced by a new, vague face, more like a cauliflower than a person. And he didn't see the schoolmaster any more – his neighbour from the first floor. There seemed to be someone else living in his flat now, a glib, slimy fellow, completely smooth-shaven every morning, always murmuring his bookish knowledge into the phone and winning all the radio competitions. The two little girls weren't there any more either, the ones like two peas in a pod, who used to play on the garage roof in the summer. Now whenever it was warm some skinny young women would be basking there, presenting their white bellies to the washed-out rays of the sun, which didn't tan the

skin the way it used to, but made it go grey, like a faded burlap sack.

The familiar faces belonged to a woman whom he thought had died long ago, as he had known her since the war, and a young man with shoulder-length hair, a provincial hippy – he saw him almost every morning on the bridge, by the weather-worn statue of Saint John of Nepomuk; he would cross the bridge and spit into the river on his way. Maybe he was going to work, thought Leo, because he assumed some sort of work must be going on somewhere. For example, he could hear the Blachobyt mill roaring over the hills, and some nights there was a glow of dirty yellow light from over there.

He told himself to weep, because it seemed appropriate, although he didn't really feel any sorrow. And sometimes he managed it. Standing at the junction of Piast Street and Podjazdowa Street he would weep, as the hideous cars drove past, incapable of doing him any harm.

Mismancy

I've found some strange things on the Internet – various kinds of divination, for example:

Aeromancy, divination by observing the air.
Alectryomancy, divination using a cockerel.
Anthropomancy, divination using human entrails.
Cattabomancy, divination using vessels made of metal.
Gastromancy, divination based on sounds coming from the stomach.
Idolomancy, divination using statues, figurines and effigies.

Logarithmancy, divination with the help of logarithms.
Macharomancy, divination by knives.
Oinomancy, divination by wine.
Omphalomancy, divination by the navel.
Sciomancy, divination by shadows.
Stareomancy, divining the future through the elements.
Tephramancy, divination by means of ashes.
Theriomancy, divination by means of wild animals.
Tiromancy, divination from the way cheese is cut.

The Second-Hand Man

In September they started reading a new novel on the local radio, English or American I think, called *The Second-Hand Man*. I don't remember the author's name; it was something ordinary sounding. It was the sad, long-winded tale of a man who had the persistent, pernicious feeling of being a duplicate, not genuine, as if he were nothing but a copy of someone who already existed, the substitute for someone original. For example, he had been adopted from an orphanage, so although he did have biological parents, he didn't know who they were. He was adopted by some people whose own son had died, so he wasn't a proper son himself, but a substitute for that other child. The first three episodes described his youth. He grew up convinced that he was just the dregs of someone else, someone better. In episode four he went to university and became fascinated by Plato. He understood perfectly what Plato had in mind when he wrote about the Idea and its Shadow, that something real and individual can exist, perfect in its uniqueness, along with something more hazy, reflected, and, like every reflection, discontinuous, full of imperfections and thus false,

only a distant relation. This episode was a bit boring. The radio was sitting on the terrace because I was painting the door, so the workmen up on the roof also heard about the feeling of being a duplicate and the resulting despair. The hero of the book became obsessed with philosophy. He wrote his Ph.D. on some follower of Plato, I don't remember what he was called, some typical ancient Greek name, and in the end it turned out that even this work of his was unintentional plagiarism because he had written the same thesis as someone else. In the next few episodes he got married to a divorcée – he was her second husband, but she had never stopped loving the other man. There was a scene – I heard it while sorting things out in the attic – where the hero finds the other guy's toiletries in the bathroom cupboard, arranged like a museum exhibit, and in the end he starts brushing his teeth with the other man's brush, spraying himself with his aftershave, and putting on his pyjamas, and the wife urges him to make love to her the same way as the other man did. It reminded me of Polanski's *The Tenant*, maybe not the film itself, but just my reaction the first time I saw it. Further on in the book it turned out that the hero was of course a stepfather, a second father. He couldn't have children of his own. Shadow People can't multiply, he thinks. He works as an editor at a publisher's and corrects other people's books. He dreams of writing his own book, but in other people's he always discovers his own thoughts, already written down. In the phone book there are several dozen other people with the same surname as his, and the police keep harassing him because he has the same name as some bigamist. To cap it all, everyone mistakes him for a rather unpopular politician whom he resembles.

I missed the last two episodes because I was out fetching planks from Wambierzyce, so I don't know how the story of the

Second-Hand Man ended. He must have died, like everyone else. Perhaps his body got mixed up and he was buried with someone else's name. Or maybe there was another funeral going on alongside his, of someone more important, and the music from the brass band drowned out the priest's routine, photocopied address.

Whiteness

They came in a white car. R. went out to meet them and help lug their cases out of the boot, and they stood by the car for a while – R. always admires our guests' cars. He asks how old they are and how much fuel they consume. Both dogs were bounding about with joy, and then Janka, as usual, sat herself down in the driver's seat.

Their car was white, white as white can be. I went out on to the steps and waved at them. She was already coming towards me, peering at the steep path underfoot. The whiteness of the car provided a background for her slender profile. She came floating out of a white screen, like a figure emerging from a film and then disappearing into the darkness of the auditorium. And I was the audience.

As I was looking at her and smiling, I realized that any form of whiteness is at odds with the natural order of things, and doesn't exist in nature. Even snow isn't white; it is grey, yellow, shining gold, it can be blue as the sky or dark as graphite. That's why white tablecloths and sheets rebel and insist on going yellow, as if they want to rid themselves of their unreal colour. The usual washing powders are no help – like many human inventions they just produce an illusion by reflecting light.

July full moon

Marta saw that we had carried chairs out on to the terrace and arranged them in two or three rows. We kept pushing our way through the door with trays full of tumblers and wine glasses; teaspoons jangled in cups and stools scraped across the floor. Some of us had already taken our places and were chatting in lowered voices, in the same monotone as a theatre audience while the auditorium is filling up. Nothing comes of these words, they're barely audible, they just pretend to offer opinions and set the air in motion like dandelion seeds. Meanwhile we took white cigarettes out of rustling packets.

Someone was passing a mug or a side plate over other people's heads, and someone else was going back into the hall for a sweater. R. brought out two bottles of wine and put them down on the garden table. A pair of binoculars hung round his neck. One of the women was leaning against the wooden balustrade checking the setting of her camera. A young man with a beard was looking at his watch, and then everyone began to check the time, the light in the hall went out and the house went dark. Only the small red flares of the cigarettes, like fat fireflies, moved up and down, marking the route of hands to mouths in the darkness.

Marta buttoned up her cardigan, because waves of cold air were already rolling in from the forest. The night was still and silent. The crickets had not come to life yet.

Now Marta could hear a sudden commotion on the terrace. We were emitting rapturous sighs, and a woman's voice said, 'There it is.'

Marta turned and saw the same thing we were seeing – a thin but intense, blood-red stripe on the horizon, right between two spruce trees. The camera clicked and the binoculars tapped

gently against plastic shirt buttons. The red line started to grow and change into a cupola – a huge, luminous mushroom sprouting on the horizon. It was visibly growing, becoming a semicircle, and by then it was obvious that from behind the edge of the world the moon was being born, the two spruce trees holding it between them like a child. The camera clicked discreetly again and again, until finally the moon freed itself from the earth, detached itself from the black line of the horizon and, swaying precariously, drifted upwards. It was enormous.

One of us began to clap solemnly, and soon other hands were joining in with the applause. As the moon was leaving the safe space between the two spruces, its colour gradually changed – first it was yellow, then white, and then greenish. We could clearly see the features of its face above the crowns of the trees.

But Marta was looking at the people on the terrace, where the wineglasses were chinking. The pop of a champagne cork made her jump. After a while people started talking, first in an undertone, then louder and louder, until everything was back to normal.

Hearing

As there were a lot of people in the house and not enough beds, I went to sleep in the orchard, on the red iron bedstead where I sometimes sit and read in the daytime. I made it up with pure white bed-linen, which looked a luminous shade of grey in the darkness.

I could see the outside of the house; light was pouring from the bathroom window, casting a long, bright trail on the pond, and then the pump came rumbling on. When it fell silent a minute later, the house went dark and vanished. Now the sky looked brighter.

The night is not as dark as they say. It has softer lights in it that drift from the sky to the mountains and valleys. The earth shines too, emitting a wintry glow, slightly phosphorescent, like the glow of bare bones and sawdust. This faint glimmer can't be seen in the daytime, or during bright moonlit nights or in well-lit towns and villages. Only in total darkness does the light of the earth become visible.

There are also the stars and the moon, so it was bright.

I took a careful look at each area of empty space that I could see from my bed, each tree, each clump of grass, each bit of the horizon. It all looked as if it were scattered with ashes, dusted with flour. The nocturnal light had rubbed out all the sharp angles and brought opposites closer together. The borders between one thing and another had been effaced; things there were several of all looked the same, like exact copies. These images must have lulled me to sleep, because when I awoke suddenly, I could see nothing but darkness – by then the moon had set. But my hearing was aroused and had taken me captive, and was now dragging me after it as it crawled over the walls of the house, listening. Gradually, out of the apparent silence came the breathing of the people asleep in the house, at first just faint rustling noises that sounded in my ears, until my entire body was filled by my heightened sense of hearing, like a bowl of flesh, a glass, or an ear trumpet pressed against the walls. I began to do nothing but listen, for the first time in my life: the breathing became a purring, a whirring sound; I seemed to hear the sleepers' eyelids flapping together restlessly, and their hearts making a thumping sound that was heavier than air. The beds were creaking steadily, to the rhythm of sleep. Then I heard the noise of a mouse metropolis inside the walls of the house, with tiny intersections, places where tender meetings happen, and storerooms full of food. I could even hear the woodworm in the legs of the pine table. I heard the refrigerator take off deafeningly

on one of its chilly night flights. Then I heard moths tickling the cool expanses of the night. But it was all shattered by a hysterical peal of drops falling from the kitchen tap. Deafened, I turned on to my back and stared into the sky. It should have been quiet as usual, but it wasn't – now I could hear the whiz of falling meteors and the blood-chilling roar of a comet.

Who wrote the life of the saint and how he knew it all

A young seminarian took all the documents from Paschalis and told him to come back in the evening, when, without saying more, he showed him to the room he was to occupy while waiting for the council's decision. The room was dark and damp; from the window he could see the river and some poor cottages along its banks. In some ways the room reminded him of his cell at the convent – the narrow bed, and the table and chair opposite it, though instead of the sheepskin rug there was a prayer stool. He knelt down on it and tried to pray, but Kummernis refused to come. Paschalis's mind was on the smooth decorative details of the furniture rather than the saint, so finally he tried kneeling on the stone floor, but he still couldn't concentrate. The murmur of the river came floating up from outside, along with street noises, wheels squealing and people shouting. Glatz was not conducive to praying. For the first time in years he went to sleep without saying his prayers.

Next day the same seminarian informed him that the bishop was reading his documents, so his audience with him would be tomorrow. The day after he told him the same thing, and the following day too. So Paschalis went on living in the bishop's palace and had time to see the town.

He saw a vast number of people; he couldn't believe how many of them lived in one place. He was amazed that they didn't all know each other. They passed each other in the street impassively, without exchanging so much as a glance. From morning to evening he walked about this strange town until his sandal straps hurt his skin. He saw the tradesmen at the market, their stalls filled with every kind of wares. It was hard to imagine what all those things were supposed to be for. He saw children playing in the street, animals exhausted by the noise and heat, and brightly painted wooden statues in the churches that looked deceptively real.

But what fascinated him most were the women. Here in the town they were even more conspicuous, concrete and tangible. As he was praying in the church he recognized their presence by the rustle of their dresses and the gentle tap of their heels. He would furtively inspect every detail of their clothing and hair, the weave of their plaits, the line of their shoulders, the fluent motion of their hands as they made the sign of the cross. When no one was looking he copied these movements, as if practising an elaborate magical spell.

On one of the streets along the river he found a house where young girls were always standing out in front with their dresses hitched up to their knees. Their shirt straps seemed to have accidentally come undone, and their skinny chests were bare. Paschalis walked past that way several times a day, and whenever he became lost in thought his legs took him there on their own, into those damp-smelling riverside alleyways and that permanently waterlogged neighbourhood. The girls weren't always the same, but he soon learned to recognize them all. They also got to know him and smiled at him like an old friend. One day, as he was hurrying by, one of them whispered to him, 'Come here, little brother, I'll show you something you've never seen before.'

This remark was like a slap on the cheek; for a moment Paschalis lost his breath and the blood rushed to his face, but he didn't stop. That same day on a stall he saw little wooden crosses with Kummernis on them. 'That's Holy Anxiety,' said the stall-keeper, 'patron saint of all changes.' Paschalis bought himself a little cross with the money he had got from the prioress.

Finally he was called to see the bishop.

'This is all very illuminating and spiritually uplifting. You have described the story of this unusual woman's life beautifully, but many things in her writings give us cause for concern,' began a man in a black-and-white habit. He spread the documents out in front of him and pored over them for a while. The bishop was staring out of the window with his back towards the room.

'What, for example, do the following words mean? "I saw it. It was infinite and powerful, but not everywhere the same. Some of it was nearer to Him and some further away. At its edges it froze and went solid like molten iron."'

'It's about God,' said Paschalis, but the bishop didn't react. The monk in the black-and-white habit, however, said, 'I understand that it may be a poetic metaphor, but as you'll admit, it's rather bold. The Mother Superior should be more cautious and discriminating. It's not yet fully elaborated, my son . . . Or this: "Whatever I do it is for love of You, and in loving You I must love myself, for the force that is alive within me, the force that loves is You." That sounds most heretical . . . Whatever I do . . . As if I were listening to one of those schismatics. Or, if Your Excellency will be so good as to listen . . .'

A sheet of paper filled with Paschalis's even handwriting fluttered to the floor.

'"I know that You live within me. I can see You within myself – You manifest Yourself within me in everything that I

can trust – in rhythms, ebbs and flows, waxings and wanings. I belong to the sun and the moon, for I belong to You, I belong to the world of plants and animals, for I belong to You. When the moon stirs the blood within me each month I know that I am Yours, that You have invited me to Your table to taste the flavour of life.'"

'The sun and the moon,' the bishop suddenly repeated, and those were the only words he uttered throughout the meeting.

Somehow Paschalis knew that everything was lost, so he drew his final argument out of his pocket – the little wooden cross with the half-naked body of a woman with the face of Christ. 'You can buy this everywhere,' he said. 'The faithful make pilgrimages to Albendorf for her blessing.'

He laid the cross down on the sheets of manuscript. The bishop and the monk leaned over it.

'What a tasteless piece of absurdity,' said the monk, pulling a face. 'People don't know what they're doing.' He took the cross in two fingers with evident disgust and handed it back to Paschalis.

'We appreciate the effort you have put into writing the life of this woman. We also have the most heartfelt confidence in Mother Aniela, but with the best will in the world we do not understand what significance this story could have for the faithful. You see, we live in troubled times. People have lost their fear of God and seem to think they can dictate the conditions to God themselves, and drag the faith into their own earthly, human complaints. I have no need to give you examples of all the schismatics in which our earth abounds. Our task is to defend the purity of the faith. We have many recognized female saints who did not waver from the true faith and sacrificed themselves to a martyr's death. Saint Agatha, who refused the hand in marriage of the pagan king of Sicily . . . her breasts were

cut off; Saint Catherine of Alexandria who was torn apart by horses and beheaded, or Apollonia, a mainstay of the faith during persecution. She was tied to a pillar and all her teeth were ripped out, one after another. Or Saint Fina, who though paralysed increased her own torment by sleeping on a bed of stone, until finally letting herself be eaten by rats . . .'

The bishop raised his head and glanced reprovingly at the monk. Silence fell.

'All those examples are true,' the monk began again, but more quietly. He carefully started gathering up the documents from the table. 'He who defends the faith and dies an honest, martyr's death, his suffering makes sense, his torment, though shocking and terrible, fits within the boundaries of good taste. But there is something unhealthy, I would say sacrilegious, in this naked body on the cross. The cross brings to mind the Saviour, the Son of God. But here are naked breasts, the face of our Lord above naked breasts . . . You have allowed yourself to be deluded by this effigy, as has Mother Aniela too . . .'

The monk handed Paschalis his documents.

Paschalis immersed himself in the town and by evening had walked almost all its streets. His legs had been expecting the journey to Rome and were ready to travel, so he had to walk and walk to give them relief. He could still go back to the bishop's palace that night, where he would have a bed to sleep in and some supper, but he didn't want to.

'Shit,' he said to himself for the first time in his life, and realized that he was standing in front of an inn in the riverside street. A chill and the smell of water came wafting off the river. As people came and went the door of the inn kept opening, shrouding him in the stuffy, acrid warmth of human bodies.

Someone touched his sleeve, and he saw beside him one of the girls whose red lips and cheeks shone out against the grey

stone walls. She was looking him in the eye, and gradually her lips widened into a smile. She seized hold of her bodice and two white breasts jumped out into Paschalis's face. They seemed perfect to him, just as they ought to be. The girl dragged him after her inside one of the neighbouring houses. They crossed a low, stinking hall and climbed a few wooden steps into a room of some kind. It was dark, but he could feel that it was small.

'Have you got any money?' she asked and lit a candle.

He shook the purse that was tied beneath his habit; the coins jingled. The room really was small. A mattress stuffed with straw lay on the floor against the wall. Paschalis put his bag of documents by the door while the girl lay down on the mattress and pulled her skirt up to her chin. He stood over her, staring at her legs thrown wide in ragged stockings, and the black blotch between them, but not knowing what to do.

'Well, brother, what are you waiting for?' said the girl, laughing.

'I'd like to lie on top of you,' he stuttered, with a lump in his throat.

'Well I never, so you'd like to lie on top of me,' cried the girl, feigning surprise.

Paschalis knelt down and gently sank on top of her. There he lay for a while, afraid to breathe.

'Now what?' asked the girl.

He took her hands and spread them wide. He touched the inside of her palms – they were hard and rough. His face touched her hair, which smelled of fried fat. The girl lay still beneath him, and he could hear her steady breathing.

'It may not be too warm in here but perhaps you'd better get undressed,' she said calmly.

He thought it over, then got up and started taking off his clothes. She quickly pulled off her dress. Now they were

touching each other's naked skin. He listened intently to her breathing. He could feel her rough hairs tickling the skin on his stomach.

'There's something wrong with you,' she whispered into his ear and started moving her hips rhythmically. He didn't answer or move. She took his hand and gently guided it between her legs. He sought the opening leading deep into her body that he had so often imagined, but it was all quite different.

'Yes, like that,' said the girl.

Suddenly he withdrew his hand in fright and tried to get up, but she drew him back down with her legs.

'You're so beautiful, you've got hair like a girl,' she said.

He reached for her cast-off dress and stood up. She watched in amazement as he solemnly put it on. She knelt and helped him to lace the bodice.

'Stockings,' he said.

She pulled them off and handed them to him. They barely reached his knees. He closed his eyes and drew his hands over his breast and hips. As he moved, the dress moved with him.

'Lie down like before, spread your arms wide, then I'll open my eyes,' he said.

She did as he asked. He stood over her gazing for a long while, then raised the folds of the skirt and knelt down between her legs. Gradually he sank on top of her and entered her faultlessly as if he had had plenty of practice, and then slowly and systematically began to pin her to the ground.

A dream

I dreamed I got a letter. It was lying on my desk along with all the other papers that pile up when we're away and that have to be

read one by one – gone for ever is the joy of pulling individual envelopes from particular people out of the letter-box and reading them in solemn concentration. It lay among all the election leaflets, advertisements for hypermarkets and language schools, bank statements, phone bills, letters with a seal instead of the sender's name, official demands, postcards with laconic greetings, reminders, information and announcements. It was not exactly a letter – that sort of communication seems to have died out without anyone noticing. It was more like an advertisement, a bad photocopy with fuzzy type – the sort of thing that isn't worth reading. Also, unlike a proper letter, it formed its own envelope; it was really just a sheet of paper with the address and a stamp on it, folded in four with a strip of glue along one edge.

It began with the words, 'Wake up!' I didn't read on, or else I've forgotten what it said. Maybe it said: 'Wake up! Poland is teetering on the brink. Vote for our party!' Or: 'Wake up! Don't miss a golden opportunity. We're giving away a multi-variety pack of narcissus bulbs on all purchases worth over 300 zlotys.' Or: 'Wake up knowing a foreign language. Our method of learning as you sleep guarantees mastery of any language in only three weeks.' All I remember is that I opened it with a knife, like all the other letters, and now every knife is associated in my mind with that 'Wake up' call, and always will be, I think, and with the act of slicing open the flat body of a folded piece of paper, disembowelling a paper animal in order to get at its prophetic, meaningful entrails.

Lurid boletus in sour cream

Some friends came over from Wałbrzych and I treated them to mushrooms. At the last moment they asked what sort of

mushrooms they were, and when I told them they wouldn't eat – as if eating or not eating something could save us from death. We're all going to die, regardless of whether we eat this or that, do this or that, or think this or that. Death would seem to be a more natural event than life. The *Paxillus involutus*, before being labelled in the modern guides as poisonous, was a tasty mushroom. Whole generations have eaten it, because it grows everywhere. When I was a child it was gathered in a separate basket so that it could be cooked for a long time and the liquid poured off. Now they say it kills you slowly, attacking the kidneys, accumulating somewhere in the intestine to do its harm. So by eating these mushrooms you will end up both alive and dead simultaneously, a certain percentage alive and a certain percentage dead. It is hard to say at what point one passes into the other. For some reason people attach great weight to this one, brief moment of either-or.

Lurid boletus in wine and sour cream

about a kilo of lurid boletus
four tablespoonfuls of butter
a quarter of a glass of dry white wine (the Czech sort with the sunflower on the label is best)
a pinch of pepper and a pinch of hot paprika
salt
a glass of sour cream
half a glass of grated Tatra Highlands sheep's milk cheese

Fry the mushrooms in butter for five minutes. Add the wine and simmer for three more minutes. Then add the pepper, paprika and salt, pour in the sour cream, add the cheese and mix. Serve on toast or with potatoes.

The heatwave

During the heatwave Marta sat outside her house in the sun all afternoon, watching our house from her little bench. She went on wearing the same old cardigan; her skin must have been hot and sweaty underneath it. A border guard's motorbike lay up in the mountain pass, under an elder bush. Beside it the border guard, with binoculars instead of eyes, was looking at Marta and us. Higher still, a hawk was hovering in the cloudless, motionless sky – we call it the Holy Ghost, because it moves the way the Holy Ghost must move, effortlessly and omnisciently. It was staring at the border guard, who was looking at Marta, who was looking at us. The whole blazing hot month Marta saw the same thing.

All day we sat out on the wooden terrace. As soon as the sun emerged from behind the apple trees we got almost completely undressed and presented our white bodies to the sky. We smeared our skin with sun cream, stretched our legs out on extra little chairs and aimed our faces at the sun. Around noon we'd disappear inside for a coffee break, and then lie out in the sun again.

Thank goodness clouds exist to give their skin some brief respite, Marta was probably thinking.

In the afternoon our skin went red, so Whatsisname, passing by on his way to Nowa Ruda as usual, advised us for the umpteenth time to rub ourselves with sour milk.

Marta could see our lips moving, because while lying down we chatted, without even looking at each other. The sun made us idly garble our words. But what can you say when a ball of fire is busy forming beneath your eyelids? Our lips kept moving, and sometimes the wind brought Marta scraps of words. She knew we were suffering. She could see how one of

us would stand up from time to time and go through the cool hall to the other side of the house, where there was still a strip of shade. We would stand there in solitude, one at a time, while our lips, not in the habit of keeping still, hung open, and our unemployed jaws went on swaying like an abandoned swing. Our back terrace was the waiting-room, the resting-place, where there was no thinking or talking. There our skin cooled down, our dazzled eyesight recovered, and time returned to its rhythm. This lasted for a while, and then we would go back into the sunshine.

Words

We spent the evening drinking the Czech wine with the sunflower on the label and talking about names. Who was the guy who spent his nights changing German place names into Polish ones? Sometimes he had a flash of poetic genius, and at other times an awful word-inventing hangover. He did the naming from the start, he created this rugged, mountainous world. He made Nieroda out of Vogelsberg, he patriotically rechristened Gotschenberg with the name Polish Mountain, he turned the melancholy sounding Flucht into the banal Rzędzina, but changed Magdal-Felsen into Bógdał. Why Kirchberg should have become Cerekwica, and Pfeifferberg Świstak we'll never guess.

But then words and things do form a symbiotic relationship, like mushrooms and birch trees. Words grow on things, and only then are they ripe in meaning, ready to be spoken aloud. Only then can you play with them like a ripe apple, sniff them, taste them, and lick their surface before snapping them in half and inspecting their bashful, succulent insides.

People are like words in this way too – they cannot live without being attached to a place, because only then do they become real.

Maybe this is what Marta meant when she said something that struck me as odd at the time: 'If you find your place you'll be immortal.'

Ergo Sum

Ergo Sum once ate human flesh. It was early in the spring of 1943, somewhere between Vorkuta and the small station at Krasnoye. The five of them had been left behind in a shack by the railway track because they were supposed to unload the next lot of wagons, but the train hadn't come. During the night snow had fallen, even thicker and whiter than the snow that had already settled. They dug out some twigs and scraps of grass from under the snow and ate them. They scraped old lichen from the shack's wooden planks. Luckily there was forest all around them and they had the fire to warm their bodies, because there was nothing left to warm them from the inside.

Ergo couldn't remember the names of his companions; he had managed to forget them, but he had never been able to forget the face of the man who froze and whose flesh he ate. The man must have frozen to death in the night, because in the morning he was lying curled up by the smouldering campfire with a singed boot, as if he had stuck his foot in the fire to remind himself that he was alive as he was dying. Or maybe his foot fell into the fire after his death. He was balding and had reddish stubble. Ergo remembered that his pale lips exposed gums rotten with scurvy.

Ergo Sum's father was a village schoolmaster who lived near Borysław. He had a very ordinary name, Wincenty Sum, but in a

fit of suspiciously good humour had given his son the name Ergo. Ergo Sum sounded grand, he thought. Later he regretted that he hadn't given his son two first names, it would have been more aristocratic and civilized, it would have been a sign that Wincenty Sum and his children belonged to the West.

Ergo Sum studied history and classical literature at university in Lwów. He was twenty-four when the Soviets invaded and he was transported to Siberia.

The man who had frozen to death lay rolled in a ball, covered with a blanket, with the singed boot sticking out from under it. His cap had slipped off, revealing his bald patch. His face had human features, but was no longer human. Without a word they carried him out behind the shack and laid him in a snowdrift. Snowflakes were falling from the sky like sand – small, sharp and aggressive. A few hours later they had covered up all traces. Yet Ergo Sum kept thinking about the frozen man and could still see that singed boot before his eyes. He tried to remember what the man had said and done, what his voice was like, but he had forgotten, just as if the man in the singed boot had never been there with them. They drank warmed-up melted snow and didn't speak to one another. A blizzard had blown up, and there was howling and creaking all around them. The snow came pouring through chinks in the walls, forming symmetrical white cones, as if it were a live creature paying them a visit, or a being from outer space that had chosen to spend the night on Earth. In the morning everyone was still alive. One of them went outside and came straight back in. 'He's been buried. I can't see him any more. We'll never find him again,' he said in despair.

They leaped from their seats and went out into the snow to look for the body, which had suddenly become extremely valuable and desirable. That's how Ergo felt about it – he needed it, he longed for it, he didn't care about the thoughts at the back of

his mind – for example there were some Latin verses hanging about in his head, from Virgil or Ovid, he wasn't sure which. *Atque ita semineces partim ferventibus artus mollit aquis, partim subiecto torruit igni.** They stabbed away at the white hulk of snow with sticks, but having failed to find anything they began to scrape the snow aside with their hands, kicking holes in it, until finally it was Ergo who saw the singed boot and started wildly shrieking with joy, 'I've got him! I've got him!'

They dragged the body up against the wall of the shack and covered it with some planks and branches, then went back inside and drank warm snow again, because they were half frozen. Later one of them went out and fetched some frozen scraps of meat that he threw into the water. It wasn't Ergo Sum, no, that he remembered perfectly – the first time it was someone else. The scraps of meat thawed out in the water and then boiled for a short time – or rather they floated limply in the kettle, pale and scrawny. There was no smell, just steam rising from the pot. One of them refused to eat, but that wasn't Ergo either. At first Ergo held the meat in his mouth because it was hard and half raw and he couldn't swallow it. He had to exercise his willpower in order to swallow those scraps. Just imagine it's ordinary meat, he said to himself, like in soup. Only then did he manage to swallow it, but at once sat very still, as if he had swallowed a time bomb. In the evening the man who hadn't eaten told them they might get an allergy because their immune systems weren't adapted to consuming that sort of protein. He was a biologist or something of the kind.

'Shut up!' they said.

* *Translator's note*: '. . . and so the half-dead limbs, in part he boiled in water, and in part roasted with fire underneath . . .' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ll. 228–9).

The train still hadn't come, and by now it was absurd to hope that it would. The tracks had long since vanished beneath the snow. Gradually the small bushes and the shed were disappearing under it too. Every day they had to make an expedition to the sparse birch forest for wood. They broke off whole branches with their hands and dragged them over to the shed. In the night they heard the howling of wolves, distant and terrible. A thought occurred to Ergo Sum that kept him warm, like the fire: 'It can't be wolves. There's nothing to worry about.' It was like a solid wall that grew bigger and bigger, ousting all other thoughts, replicating itself a thousand times over, filling his entire consciousness. 'Everything's all right. It's OK.' He had the same thought when his turn came to fetch meat. He went outside, repeating those words to himself over and over in a sing-song way, like a mantra, combing his thoughts into nice, straight, disconnected strands. So he no longer saw the man; all he saw was a distorted angular shape sprinkled with snow. He cut off some scraps of meat with a knife, right down to the bone. It was difficult because the knife was blunt and the meat was frozen hard as stone. Only afterwards did it flash through his mind that he was cutting the thigh, and that they had already finished a leg. The biologist was so weak that he didn't protest when they gave him some hot liquid with a few tiny bits of meat in it, although they weren't at all concerned about his survival. Now he was just the same as them.

This went on for a week, maybe two. Ergo went on fetching meat, cutting it off the bone with the knife and snapping off the smaller bones, because eventually they had to use those up too. Soon, thanks to the snow and everything else, it was hard to recognize the source of their supplies any more – it was just a heap of rags, an irregular frozen shape. The biologist only vomited once, when they began to eat the intestines.

Someone was watching over them, Ergo Sum reckoned, because the day before the wolf attack they saw human footprints in the birch forest. They followed them a little way and could see that whoever it was had been dragging wood on a sledge, and that the sledge was being pulled along by a horse. They went back to the shed in a state of excitement. They prayed that it wouldn't snow and cover up those tracks from the outside world. That night, they heard howling from somewhere far away, then gradually it came nearer, until finally the noise and scuffling was right outside the shed. First the snarling wolves tore apart and ate up their remaining supplies, and then, stirred into a frenzy by fighting over the miserable morsels, they started pressing against the door and gnawing at the walls. Inside they got such a big fire going that it scorched the ceiling. If the night had gone on an hour longer the shed would never have held out and they would have ended up in the jaws of the wolves.

But as soon as the sun rose and the wolves had gone they made a dash for the birch forest, towards the tracks left by the man, the sledge and the horse. There were three of them, because in the morning they discovered that the biologist was no longer alive. Ergo Sum reckoned another lucky thing had happened, and that someone was definitely watching over them, because they would never have been able to carry the ailing biologist. They had a long journey ahead of them – no one knew quite how long, or whether it had an end at all.

All day they walked, through the forest and along the edge of it, until that evening, several hours after dark, they saw some lights in the distance. Somewhere behind them the wolves were howling.

So Ergo Sum and his two companions, whose names he couldn't remember, were saved. They reached a small hamlet, where there were only five houses, and there they were given

food and warmth, and their frostbitten hands and feet were allowed to heal. From there Ergo made it to the Polish troops, travelled the entire route from Lenino to Berlin and ended up in Nowa Ruda as the classics teacher at the old secondary school, where a marble bust of Goethe stood in the hall.

Sorrow, and that feeling that's worse than sorrow

These feelings always appeared immediately after Christmas and gradually grew stronger, until by February he was in a state of despair. Every year Ergo Sum went back to school after the holidays feeling like a different person. He was tired and sleepy, and his eyes and head ached. The dirty snow looked so dreadful that it caused him pain. He squinted and felt as if he were shut up inside a stiff, awkward, incompetent body, stuck inside a stiff, awkward, incompetent world. The very existence of the children at school seemed pointless to him – as did all his efforts to teach them, battling against their innate brainlessness, going blind marking their tests, going deaf from their shrieks, going grey from the omnipresent chalk dust, just so they could grow up and go off to kill each other in the next war, or drink vodka and breed another lot just like themselves in times of peace. He was teaching them Virgil, though he was fully aware that they didn't understand a word of it. He got them to bash away at simple Latin phrases that became nothing but some foreign words in their mouths. All the meaning came dribbling out of them and fell into the current of the dirty, stinking river that flowed doggedly through the town. No one for a hundred kilometres around understood Virgil, no one missed him – he was of absolutely no use at all. All around lived people who had not discovered books, who, if they ever

had a pile of them to hand that included Plato, Aeschylus and Kant, by some miracle would always find *The Mushroom Picker's Handbook* or *One Hundred Potato Recipes* among them.

The only thing with rhythm on the streets of that town devoid of all wisdom was a tuneful little ditty the children used to chant beneath his windows: 'Old man Virgil taught his kids to read, Tons of 'em he had, a hundred and forty three.'

After that the Latin language seemed to him too heavy and uninspired, turned into nonsense by religious associations.

That was why he preferred Greek. He missed it, because at the secondary school he could only teach Latin.

Whenever his marking was going badly, he would reach despairingly for Plato, whom he still hoped to translate better than anyone else had done. He even felt as if this was his real language – the beautiful, sonorous Greek words reminded him of harmonious geometric shapes. He would exchange them for Polish words, which weren't as shapely, because they were ambiguous, with prefixes that unexpectedly changed the whole meaning. God, if he existed, would have spoken in Greek.

He liked to imagine Plato and his friends holding their conversations, those four or five men semi-recumbent on stone couches. Naked shoulders, skin that, though no longer young, is still smooth, healthy and golden; the sunlight glinting on a tunic fastened with a clasp, a hand holding a wine-cup slightly raised aloft, salt-and-pepper hair cut short on the temples – that's how he imagined the older man. The two younger would have dark hair, dark eyes and full lips. One of them is Phaedrus, thought Ergo Sum. A fourth man sits up to speak, beating out the rhythm of his statement in the air with one hand. A young boy pours wine, and the plates are full of grapes and olives, although Ergo Sum was never quite sure what olives looked like. Judging from the word itself, they had to be smooth and springy, their rich juice pouring

on to your lips as soon as your teeth bite into the skin. The sun warms the stone pathways and dries out every stray drop of water. There's no word for fog, snow is a myth that lurks in tales of the night, but no one believes in it. Water appears only as Oceanus or as wine. The sky is one great rainbow of the gods.

From the window Ergo Sum could see a dark courtyard with houses on three sides, sheltered on the fourth by a wooded hillside. To see the sky he had to put his face to the glass and stare straight up. Most often it was pearly grey.

His flat was in an old, low apartment building by the river. It consisted of a kitchen, a bathroom paved with azure tiles, two larger rooms and a glazed veranda, which he didn't know what to do with. In winter he closed it off and insulated the door with rags. In summer he did exercises there while listening to the early morning radio broadcast before going to school. An ironing-board stood there too, that his housekeeper used to press his immaculate white shirts, and an old German sewing-machine. He thought of growing some flowers there in pots, like he had seen on other verandas, but he didn't know how to go about it. An old bachelor and his flowers. Ergo Sum hoped that one day he would get married, and then the flat would be just the right size – it was too big for him alone. Once a week Mrs Lisowska cleaned it. She polished the parquet floors until they shone and baked him a tart – always the same kind, all that changed was the fruit. In winter and autumn it was apple, in summer blackberry or raspberry. In spring it had to be rhubarb bought in bunches at the market. Ergo Sum had come to associate the smell of floor polish with the smell of freshly baked pastry. He would make himself a pot of tea and reach for a book from the Plato shelf, the most important thing in the house, and start to read.

What luxury, what bliss, to be sitting in his nice cool home, drinking tea, nibbling fruit tart and reading. He enjoyed chewing

over the long sentences, relishing their meaning, suddenly discovering a deeper meaning, mulling it over and letting himself drift off, staring at the rectangular window-pane. The tea would go cold in the fine china cup; a lacy wisp of steam would rise above it and vanish in the air, leaving behind just a hint of flavour. The little strings of letters on the white page provided a refuge for his eyes, his intellect, his whole being, and made the world safe and accessible. Crumbs lay scattered on the tablecloth, and his teeth tapped gently against the china cup. His mouth would start to salivate, because wisdom is as appetizing as pastry, as reviving as tea.

At his bedside he had *The Lives of the Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, which served as his reading matter last thing at night, and sometimes he reached for it as and when; if he were feeling tired of marking tests or the monotonous gabbling of the radio, he'd open it at random and read about heroes, outstanding and unusual people. The great Thales, who first had the courage to speak of the immortality of the soul, Pherecides, the teacher of Pythagoras, Socrates and his daemon, who predicted his glorious death to him, Epicurus ('It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely'), Empedocles ('What combines the four elements is Love') and the extraordinary Archemanes of Metapontum, author of *On the Duality of Things* (which explains how everything has its dual nature), but above all Plato.

And then a strange thing happened. He knew Plato almost by heart, but there was one fragment that he had somehow never noticed. In the eighth book of *The Republic* he suddenly discovered a sentence that startled him. He stopped dead as he read it and absorbed its meaning: 'He who has tasted human entrails must become a wolf.' Yes, that's exactly what it said. Ergo Sum stood up, went across into the kitchen, looked out of the window at the apartment house opposite and thought he had already managed

to forget about the strange sentence. He switched on the radio, which poured out some quite indifferent music. He rummaged in a drawer, tore a leaf from the calendar, and picked bits of tart from between his teeth with a broken matchstick, but it was no good. The first crystals of frost had appeared in his mind and were now spreading in all directions, freezing everything in their path. The kitchen was still the same, so was the view, and the scent of the tea was still hanging in the air; the flies were fondly fingering the crumbs with their proboscises, but that terrible, empty landscape of eternal winter had already taken over in his mind – nothing but a white, frozen expanse all around, sharp edges, the cold and the sound of snow crunching underfoot.

He checked the sentence several times a day in case he had imagined it – the subconscious loves to play tricks. Then he checked it in other editions, other copies, in translations into Polish, Russian and German. The sentence was there all right, and Plato had written it, so it was true.

How strange some thoughts are, how they expand like leavened pastry (all these culinary associations – how low I have fallen, thought Ergo Sum). That one sentence, that one image now filled his life. He took leave, although there were final exams going on, and spent his time sitting in an armchair. In the evenings he began to sweat and his skin became rough. He was afraid to look at his hands and was awoken by the chattering of his own teeth, until one night a full moon appeared briefly above the houses, and Ergo Sum began to howl. He crammed his hand in his mouth and dug his nails into his cheeks, but it was no use – he went on howling inside and, strangely, it brought him complete physical relief, as if he had been holding his breath for a long time and had breathed out at last.

He only suffered when he got agitated and refused to give in to the wolf, when he was at an interim stage – no longer a

person, a classicist with a funny name, but not yet an animal. It was hellishly painful. His whole body ached, every last little bone and every muscle, on top of which he felt such terrible fear that death seemed nothing but a mild ache in comparison. This was too much for Ergo Sum to withstand, and no wonder, so all of a sudden he let go of this whole convulsive effort to cling on to life; in one single moment he gave up the fight, sank to the very bottom of himself and lay there, breathing heavily. He didn't know how it had happened, but the wolf now had the upper hand. Ergo Sum went rushing about the park, into the long grass on the hill slopes, into the allotments and cemetery plots, as far as possible from people and the stink of their houses. His memory wiped itself clean, so that next morning he was quite unable to say where he had been the night before.

The chestnut trees were in bloom when Ergo Sum went to Wrocław. In the libraries there he found out that it was a classic case of lycanthropy – when a man becomes a wolf. As he walked about the war-torn city, now and again he looked at his hands in case coarse grey hair had started to grow on them. It even became a habit; whenever he was off guard and let his mind drift into visions of the future, imagining the conversations he would have with doctors, psychiatrists and quacks, and even imagining what he would say to the dead man he had eaten, he would automatically stretch out his hands in front of him and at once return to reality.

Life went on like this throughout the school holidays. The year must have been 1950, because the summer was damp and cloudy. The wet weather evidently suited the plants; the grass grew long and lush, and the bushes put out strong shoots, but the people weren't happy and sat it out on their verandas, playing cards and drinking vodka.

The July full moon came, Ergo Sum's third full moon as a

werewolf, for which he made careful preparations. He bought some twine in a gardening shop, changed the locks on the doors and even – at great risk – got himself a drop of morphine. The whole event was highly theatrical – the clouds drew aside, revealing the moon, suspended overhead like a bomb. It began to rise over the allotments, got tangled in the fruit trees, then shot straight into the sky and took possession of the entire earth. Ergo Sum slept tied to a chair.

Two little dreams from the Internet

1. I'm looking at myself from behind. I can see the layer of loose fat that covers my back. There are sparse, single black hairs growing on it. The skin is warm to the touch, a bit rough. I'm amazed, because it's the first time I've ever seen my own back view. But the unnatural skin doesn't make me feel disgusted or put me off – I go on staring in wonder. With even greater surprise I notice a navel there. I didn't know my back had a navel too. This navel is like the reverse of the front one: the front navel points inwards, whereas this one sticks out.

2. I'm standing on a bridge, a low bridge, and I plunge my hands into the pure water. I can see my reflection. In the water there are a lot of little golden fish and I'm catching them. The more I fish out, the more appear.

Cutting hair

Marta and I were sitting on the wooden steps of the terrace. R. had made a horseradish ointment using home-made alcohol and I was rubbing Marta's hands with it.

Marta is old. The skin on her hands is thin and smooth, and covered in brown spots. Her nails are white and look lifeless, as if she had never worked. Beneath the skin I could feel fragile little bones that were swollen around the joints. It was rheumatism that was causing her pain, like a frost in the body. Maybe that's why Marta always feels cold, even during the heatwave. She wore the same long-sleeved cardigan all summer, with a grey dress under it. The collar of the dress was completely worn out, fraying at the neck. The horseradish ointment smelled sharp, drowning out the fragrance of the flowers in the borders. I rubbed it into Marta's hands until it vanished under the skin, where its heat would melt the ice that was attacking her body.

A cart full of manure came along the road. A man was walking alongside it, staring at us. For a while the smell of horseradish was mixed with the smell of dung.

Later we drank some tea, which tasted of everything around us. Marta took a look at my hair and asked, 'How do you manage to cut it so evenly? Look at mine.'

She stuck her fingers into her pure white locks. Her hair really was uneven; she must have cut it herself. She had probably muddled through by looking in two little mirrors, which always makes you confuse left and right. I got up and fetched the little Philips clippers that R. got for Christmas. I showed her how they work, demonstrating the blades and the lengths you can set them to. Her grey eyes wandered from the machine to my head, and then suddenly she asked me to cut her hair.

All right, I said. I extended the cable into the hall and plugged it in. Marta held two fingers apart to show how long her hair was to be, I put the blade on the right setting, and the first tufts fell, fine and white like downy feathers. Marta shook them from her cardigan on to the floorboards. When I had finished her head was covered in a soft, silvery velour. We both rubbed our hands

over it. Marta suddenly burst out laughing, so for fun I put the clippers in her hand and presented my own head. At first she sheared it rather awkwardly, then more and more boldly. My dark hair fell beside her light curls. When I tried to throw away the tufts we swept up from the terrace afterwards, Marta took them, rolled them into a dark-and-light ball and went to bury it in the flowering borders. We sat down on the steps and stroked each other's sheared heads again.

The sun was slowly disappearing from the terrace. The shadow on the floorboards was creeping further forward with every passing second, until finally it reached our backs and divided our bodies in half – into dark and light. Then, painlessly and imperceptibly, it swallowed us.

Marta creates a typology

Marta and I went to pick wild camomile. Despite the heatwave, she was wearing her warm, woollen cardigan as usual. We plucked the bright, yellow-and-white heads and tossed them into a basket. Marta said that people are like the ground they live on, whether they like it or not, whether they are aware of it or not.

People born where the soil is light and sandy are small, with fair, dry skin. At first glance they seem rather weak and lacking in energy, but they're like the sand – dogged, and able to hold on to life just as pine trees hold on to the sand in which they grow. They're mistrustful, and don't believe in things that others regard as definite and certain. They're mobile and ubiquitous, and they're not afraid of long journeys, so they often emigrate to other countries, because they feel all right in lots of different places. They soon get used to new things, and quickly forget

what has happened to them in the past. They don't suffer for long after misfortunes, losses and let-downs in love. They can scent out the future, they know what's going to happen. They do have a failing of not keeping their promises – because everything seems to them so temporary and changeable; the person who makes the promise is not the same person as the one who keeps it. They produce a lot of children, small and fair like themselves. These children grow up quickly and leave their parents without any regrets. Then they send greetings cards home. Such people never yearn for the past – they're always more interested in what's happening now. What's over is dead and gone.

People who are born where there's a lot of water, in fertile lakelands or on the banks of great rivers, are different. Their bodies are soft, fragile and sensitive, their skin is darker, with an olive tinge, cool and damp with blue veins beneath it. Their hands and feet easily get cold, and when they're young their foreheads are covered in pimples and their hair is greasy. These people are attached to the past, which makes them cautious and not keen on change. It is easy to offend them, to make an innocent remark that sinks deep into their memory and remains there for ever, engendering feelings that live on for the rest of their life. They cry easily, not just as a result of sorrow or grief of some kind, but also out of joy and excitement. They're as trustful as animals, so they fall in love early, and quickly form lifelong attachments. Their bodies grow accustomed to each other, while their souls merge together like two puddles, so they don't need speech to understand each other. What they dislike most is any kind of journey. They say that everywhere is the same, so it's better to stay at home and breathe your own air than go wandering about, even in the most interesting countries. If they lose their home during wars or unrest, they die soon after. Their children are difficult and tearful, and they have to get up in the

night to comfort them. These children don't want to go to school, not because they're stupid, but because they're frightened by all the noise and confusion. Their animals are just the same – quiet and affectionate. Their cows give them lots of milk, their sheep have thick fleeces and their hens lay large, heavy eggs. They build their houses for their whole life or for many generations. They are squat, with thick walls.

There are also people born on rocky ground, on sandstone or granite. Their skin is rough and hard, as are their muscles and bones. They have strong hair and teeth, and the skin on their palms and the soles of their feet is hard. On the surface they are tough and robust, because their bodies are like armour. They have a lot of empty space inside, so everything they see and hear echoes within them like a bell. They never forget anything. They can remember almost every day of their lives, the taste of every dish they've eaten, and every word that has ever been said to them. They can get by without other people, although other people need them, because they're like road signs or boundary stones that show where something starts and finishes, and where the road is going.

I asked Marta what type of person she is. Smart-aleck that she is, she said she doesn't know. 'You only think up these systems for other people,' she added after a while.

The mansion

The von Goetzen family lived in a mansion, although they didn't build it themselves, or even know the whole building, which became apparent whenever essential renovations took place. They had lived in the mansion for as long as they could remember, from birth – sometimes they even felt as if they had lived in

it before then, in previous lives, because they dreamed of nothing but the mansion, its rooms and corridors, the courtyard and the park, as if their souls knew of no other place. They only had to do what was required to keep the mansion going, and to ensure that the fields and meadows brought in the necessary income for extensions and improvements. Besides, there was always money in some bank or other, so they would withdraw it, invest it cleverly and pay it back into the bank again. They only ever went away in order to learn something new about gardens, soil cultivation or sheep breeding, or to see the frescoes in Venice, the way a roof was capped in Switzerland, the interior at Versailles, or the tapestries and rococo furniture adorning a French château. And they brought it all home, either physically with the help of ships and trains, or else in their imagination. Some of them studied philosophy or literature, but this too was only so they could live out their lives in this heavenly place even more fully and intensely.

For generations they had been born in the mansion. The children were brought up rather neglectfully in the care of wet-nurses, peasant girls from the village who were always willing to heap their boundless affection on any little creature. They had no memory of any child having died before its time. They were healthy, robust and well proportioned, with pink fingernails and bright eyes. Their only weakness was their teeth, but it didn't really matter in a world where the apples were always peeled, only the soft part of the bread got eaten and the meat was cooked until tender. So when their teeth prematurely went black and fell out, there was always a barber who doubled as a surgeon or a dentist in the mansion, who had perfected the art of making false teeth for them, even finding ways to fit complete sets of dentures to their innocent gums. There should have been a set of false teeth on the von Goetzen family coat of arms.

So the children grew up amid parks and gardens, verandas and bathrooms full of mirrors. It was a painless process, without any ups or downs. They never rebelled against their pleasure-absorbed parents, or had any objection to life in the mansion. Occasionally they were drawn into the less well-defined world outside and would end up attending a harvest festival or a Corpus Christi fair in the village. But since they only enjoyed being there for a while, they'd soon grow disenchanted and go home for tea. As they grew up, they didn't even suffer from acne.

Then they reached the age for love. Their wise mothers usually provided them with objects for their affection on home ground, but they did sometimes travel with this aim in mind, to their relatives in Pomerania or Hess, and then love would take on an exotic quality. They would bring their wives or husbands home to the mansion, and then they would have to build a new wing or floor, or convert the attic into living quarters, so the mansion kept growing along with them, plunging deeper into the park or pushing higher into the sky.

Young love always blossomed indoors, at tea parties, card games, or small family dances, with the light falling gently through the window, taking the gloss off their faces better than the finest powder. It was quiet, with no wind to drown out a whispered word or spoil a carefully arranged curl. They usually fell in love at first sight. Love had special powers in the mansion, where most couples lived long and happily – if not passionately in love, then at least with respect and friendship. Their betrayals were never very dramatic – involving a maid or a gardener, or a brief moment of forgetfulness in the cloakroom after a ball when they were guests at another mansion. There was once a Mrs von Goetzen who left her husband suddenly, and for no reason – she simply disappeared into the dark world outside. He suffered, but not for long – next year he married a lovely neighbour, and they even had twins.

Not many of the von Goetzens had children, however, perhaps to avoid overcrowding the mansion. Some had just one child, and to have two children, like those twins, was a rarity. Children introduced a certain degree of noise into the life of the mansion, but you could dress them nicely and let them get their mouths all smeared in strawberry jam, and at once they were the stereotype in miniature of their flourishing tribe, living metaphors for the bloom of youth or innocence, like the spring personified, or whatever the adults wished them to be.

Dinners in the conservatory went on late into the night. Lamps burning in the garden emphasized the famously gigantic lime trees. One generation of von Goetzens had added a winter garden on to the conservatory, full of ivies, philodendrons and rubber plants. In the warmest part of the garden cactuses grew, one of which flowered once a year, always on the very same night. On that date the family held a ball, inviting relatives from all corners of the country and neighbours from other mansions, and the party went on until dawn. The flower was actually quite modest in appearance, rather like a thistle, nor was it particularly large, yet it was immortalized in several paintings and later in photographs.

Their old age was serene and healthy. None of them ever had a lasting illness or lost their powers of intellect, or succumbed to paralysis, sclerosis, high blood pressure or all the other ailments that plagued the lives of old people outside the mansion. Maybe it was just that the flies settled on them more often; somehow flies always seem to know best who is first in line for death. At most they grew weak, imperceptibly at first, year by year, and then day by day, but they still found enough strength to draw up plans for extending one of the wings, to sort out old photographs or write their memoirs – or other people's, as they didn't actually have many memories of their own. When they were

old, they moved into rooms spread with Turkish carpets, whose windows looked on to the flowerbeds; they would lean out and pester the gardeners, saying, 'That's not the way to prune roses,' 'The azaleas are too tall,' 'The dahlias need weeding,' or 'The jasmine doesn't have much of a scent.' The resident dentist would gently encourage them to remove their false teeth more often, for their gums had grown softer and softer and, as in infancy, were coated in a fine layer of mucus – an unerring sign of approaching death.

The von Goetzens always died beautifully and gently. Death came over them like a mist, like a sudden break in the electricity supply – their eyes grew dim, their breathing slowed down and finally died away. Those attending the deathbed had only to close their departed relative's eyelids and then go about their business – in the warmth of the conservatory, the coolness of the ground-floor corridors, among the rustling pages of illustrated books on horticulture and art, or in sunny lethargy on the terrace, where they could hear the babble of people and animals drifting up from the village. There were photographs left of the deceased, as well as flowerbeds, diaries, cupboards full of mouldering clothing, and crumbs in the bed-sheets, but someone else would immediately occupy his room, so it was as if they had never died. Besides, as a result of all the family intermarrying they were all so alike that the lack of a particular individual was never felt. Someone else would soon stick their head out of the window above the flowerbeds and start ordering the gardener about in exactly the same tone of voice: 'That's not the way to prune roses,' 'The azaleas are too tall,' or 'The jasmine doesn't have much of a scent' – so you could say that no one ever died in the mansion.

Life is beautiful, despite the terrible things other people say about it. Life is beautiful – that could have been the family motto beneath the coat of arms.

The von Goetzen roses are the finest in all Silesia. At the back of the mansion there is a sizeable terrace with a rose garden. The rose bushes grow along espaliers and are arranged in carefully planned flowerbeds. The paths are covered in fine gravel that crunches beneath your feet, as the intoxicating fragrance of all sorts of roses envelops you. A dark border of crimson wilhelminas surrounds the entire garden. The flowers are lush and glossy, but their fragrance is not intense – that would have been too much. Inside this blood-red circle there are four beds, each planted with a different variety of rose: warm pink odettes, the fuchsia-coloured 'Pope Joan' variety, and bright red and yellow melittas. Between them winds a sinuous border planted with tea roses, eulalias – these have the strongest scent, a fragrance of exotic fruit that pours over the wall into the village, where on fine days it blends with the smell of cows and freshly mown meadows. It's breathtaking. The petals are delicate with pointed tips. At the centre of the flowerbeds there's a ring of white roses – the rarest and most precious variety. They don't have a name; they were cultivated by one of the Mrs von Goetzens, but no one remembers which. Their whiteness is dazzling, like snow, with the slightest hint of blue in the deepest folds of the petals. No one could fail to be struck by their beauty, but something has gone wrong with their fragrance. When they grow and reach full bloom, they start to smell like wine that's gone sour, or rotting apples. Maybe that's why no one has ever ventured to give them a name.

The approach to the mansion is between two lime trees that always blossom at the beginning of July. A road paved in sandstone leads up to the broad steps and a small courtyard shielded from the road by the servants' quarters. On the huge front door is the coat of arms of the von Goetzen family, which features an eye-catching rocking horse against a field of fleur-de-lis – a sign

of the family's wider European connections. The door opens into a large hall, off which there is a dining-room that leads into the conservatory, a library and two reception rooms opening on to the terrace. There is also a music-room, with a grand piano and a harpsichord, and a smoking-room originally for the gentlemen, but eventually the ladies too. A staircase laid with a cream carpet leads up to two ballrooms and an irregular drawing-room, added on at some point. Beyond these rooms are living quarters for the older generation of the family, while the second floor consists of apartments for the younger. All this is crowned by a vast attic, with high, sloping ceilings and little windows on to all four corners of the world. From them you can see the mountains, and houses set into the valleys like valuable cutlery pressed into a plush-lined box. The crowns of the spruce trees polish the skies as they float by. All this belongs to the von Goetzen family.

There was no warning that they would have to leave their mansion. The very idea was unthinkable – as absurd as expecting a mussel or a snail to leave its shell. And yet one of the von Goetzens had had a presentiment – he wasn't sure how it had come about, but before the war he had bought a smallish estate in Bavaria. The landscape was strikingly similar – the same gentle hills dark with spruce, the same shallow streams with stony beds – even the people looked the same, as did the churches, wayside chapels and winding little roads. The Bavarian palace was admittedly smaller, but by that token all the more suitable for development. He didn't pay much for it, because its former owners, who were strangely reticent, had gone off somewhere abroad. In fact he never even saw them; he made all the arrangements through a lawyer.

He hadn't said a word to anyone – it was meant to be a surprise. Then, as he got caught up in autumn hunting, winter

balls and spring picnics, he simply forgot about the new mansion. When the family were officially informed that the Bolsheviks were just around the corner, they assembled in the drawing-room and decided to break into their oldest wine stock. One of the women played the grand piano, while another played patience. Then the von Goetzen with the estate in Bavaria brought down photographs and showed them the new mansion. For a long time no one said anything, but the prospect of all the potential renovation and rebuilding was very tempting. They liked the solid classical form of the new house. They started to sketch out plans, but towards evening they fell strangely silent and felt dispirited. They slunk about the great house, running their fingertips over the English panelling and casting their gaze across the patterns on the wallpaper.

'Can't someone find a way for us to stay here?' asked the oldest of the ladies.

But in the morning she instructed the gardener to dig up the roses.

A tremor ran through their dreams. Prompted by a strange feeling of anxiety, the von Goetzen who had bought the mansion in Bavaria went off to the local town and found it in utter confusion. People were packing their belongings on to carts and trucks, and pressing doggedly along the only road west between the mountain peaks. Not a single enemy soldier was yet in sight, but you could feel their presence in the air. A nasty booming sound, like muffled thunder, had already begun to invade the back streets above the river. For the first time in his life von Goetzen's head began to ache. He called at a pharmacy and asked for some powders.

'It's terrible,' he said.

'We're staying here,' replied the pharmacist and offered to lend him his car, a nimble black DKW with streamlined, shining

mudguards and a steering-wheel so rarely used that it still bore traces of the factory wrapping. Its leather seats hadn't yet had time to get used to the shapes of its owners.

'Oh no, it's a new car. I couldn't possibly accept such a generous loan from you.'

'Please don't worry. You can return it to me when you come back.'

Von Goetzen began to search his pockets for some sort of deposit, a guarantee that the transaction would be honest, but he had nothing valuable on him. He glanced regretfully at his signet ring, which was white gold with a huge ruby set into it, engraved with the family coat of arms. He pulled it from his finger and placed it on the pharmacy counter.

On his way back to the mansion, from the road above he saw Soviet army vehicles parked in the courtyard. He realized that the soldiers would take the car away from him as soon as they saw it. They would ask politely, then add that it was an order. So he crossed the road into the meadow and drove into the birch forest up a steep path, barely wide enough for the DKW, though it wasn't a large car. He stopped in front of a dense spruce copse and knew it was as far as he could go. Drops of sweat were forming on his smooth young brow. Hesitantly his tongue stammered out the only filthy word he knew: bugger! Then he released the handbrake and pushed the car into the copse. He hadn't expected it to be so effective – the DKW vanished, simply dissolved among the restless spruce branches. By some sort of alchemy its black colour blended with the black of the bark and the forest floor. The glossy veneer and windows reflected the forest, camouflaging the body of the car with interwoven images of earth and sky. Von Goetzen's highly developed aesthetic sense set the blood in his veins racing. How beautiful the world is, he thought, in spite of what people say.

He ran home downhill through the undergrowth, ruining his tweed trousers.

The family were sitting in cars and lorries, hugging their favourite belongings to their chests – valuable clocks, photographic prints, jewellery boxes, china sauceboats, photo albums, dahlia and anemone bulbs, copies of paintings by Watteau, and satin bolsters. One more lorry contained the most valuable furniture, the mirrors and the books. The Soviet soldiers were harnessing thoroughbred horses from the von Goetzen stables to their cannon. As he viewed the scene from a distance, von Goetzen thought they looked as if they were all off on a bizarre expedition. In a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes the procession moved off up the hill towards Waldenburg.

My mansion

I feel as if I've got a mansion too, but it's inside me – a huge edifice with lots of storeys. Its shape is neither permanent nor predictable. The mansion is alive and changes along with me. In fact, we both live inside each other – it is in me and I am in it, though sometimes I feel like a guest, while at other times I feel certain that I am the owner. At night my mansion becomes more noticeable, shining through the darkness with a greenish light. In the sunlight it is too vivid, so during the day it makes itself invisible, but I can still feel it inside myself.

Its cellars are like labyrinths, with tiny windows looking out on to weed-choked inner courtyards. In the damp underground rooms, divided by thin walls, there are heaps of sprouting potatoes and barrels full of pickled gherkins, long forgotten and coated in a thin layer of mould. I know that the cellars extend deep into the earth, and I think there are even passageways

leading to underground caves. Finding them is as exciting as it is dangerous – you can easily lose your way back.

The mansion is sometimes inhabited, sometimes deserted. Occasionally academic conferences are held here, a lot of guests come to stay, hold debates and attend magnificent dinners. Then the mansion functions like a hotel. But sometimes it is empty, abandoned even. All the furniture vanishes, the parquet floors are torn up, the fireplaces are destroyed, and the staircases become rotten and unstable, suddenly giving way beneath your feet. Animals take up residence in the deserted mansion. I have seen deer sleeping on piles of cardboard boxes and dogs curled up on faded sofas, and I have heard the light, fluffy tread of cats' paws in an empty corridor. I have also heard something clattering noisily up the marble steps, but I have never been able to guess what sort of animal that might be.

The ground floor is a vast hall divided in half by an ornate metal grille. This is where my father keeps his fish tanks. Time slows down as the fish move slowly and gracefully through the greenish water. They're saying something, their lips are moving, but I can't hear them. The fringetails, those Marilyn Monroes of the goldfish world, sweep their tulle dresses along behind them, while shoals of neon tetra fish shimmer by. The fish tanks are buried among agaves, whose fleshy, pointed arms pierce the empty space around them. Someone has been unable to resist scratching his initials on their green leaves, or the legend 'I love Eve'. The agave heals these wounds, immortalizing other people's declarations on its body. The hall leads into the library. Somewhere among the hundreds, possibly thousands of books wrapped in grey paper with numbers on their spines is the first book I ever read – a dense, fat volume crammed full of letters, parallel lines of text offering the promise of many different lives, many different worlds. The book lured my eyes away from the

sky and the treetops, from the pond and the paths winding among the trees to one small rectangle in front of me – its pages, where at any moment a performance might begin.

A broad, carpeted staircase leads upstairs, where there are bedrooms and two large lecture halls. Or maybe they're ballrooms? Their parquet floors have witnessed all kinds of dance steps. In the far hall, the one with a door on to the terrace and the park, there's a huge fireplace with a mirror. A fire burns there once a year, on All Souls' Day. I can climb up the marble columns and stand in front of the mirror, which is so big that it reflects all of me, as well as the terrace, the park and the hall. Before I discovered the truth about mirrors, I was sure it provided a way into another part of the mansion that everyone else had forgotten about. This part has narrow passages hacked into the rocks, cloisters and tall courtyards. I found some stone sculptures scattered about in there. I realized that they had had to be put away here, in exile; apparently they were aesthetically unacceptable, even to the most eccentric of art lovers – they were rough-hewn effigies, half-people and half-animals. The rain fell on them, washing away the details.

Above the top floors, which are small and stuffy, is the attic. The stairs that lead up there start off wide, with ornate banisters and slippery handrails, then they suddenly spiral in the air and become narrow, decaying steps. You have to stick close to the wall, leaning against its smooth surface, or else your foot might get trapped in a hole.

The attic is enormous. The wooden floor is covered in dust, and there's a thick layer of it on every object up here, so the smallest things are just unrecognizable heaps – a withered apple core is transformed into a fluffy, double-ended knob, and a broom handle left lying here creates an amazing ripple on the floorboards.

It's easy to lose your way in the attic, whose layout is too large to be memorized. I know that in some corner or other there's an old mattress, a place of long forgotten forbidden games, although I can't remember whose. But the most astonishing thing in here is the windows set into the sloping roof – they're not large and they're a little too high, so you have to reach up on tiptoes to see out of them. But the view from them is extraordinary and unforgettable – what you see shows just how large and imposing the mansion is. From the attic windows everything looks tiny and unreal – like an artificial world made specially for an electric train set, like something made of Lego, or a scene from a Disney cartoon. And you can see so much of it – forests, fields, rivers and railways, great cities and ports, deserts and motorways. You can actually – though I'm not sure how this is possible – see the curve of the globe from here. It's a breathtaking view; afterwards downstairs you miss it, and think you might just summon the energy to go back up the precarious stairs to the attic, stand among the rays of sunlight and stretch up on tiptoe again to see the world outside.

I told Marta that each of us has two homes – one actual home with a fixed location in time and space, and a second that is infinite, with no address and no chance of being immortalized in architectural plans – and that we live in both of them simultaneously.

Roofs

In the von Goetzen family there was a professor, a real professor, who spent his whole life reading books, studying and travelling, and who wasn't interested in gardens. His name was Jonas Gustaw Wolfgang Tschischwitz von Goetzen. During his long

life (1862–1945) he wrote many books about the history of religion, of which the most important were *Das Heilige. Über Schlesiens Mystik* ('The Holy – on Silesian Mysticism', 1914) and *Der Ursprung der Religion* ('The Origin of Religion', 1918). He had two passions in life: religion and roofs. He reckoned these two subjects must have something in common, or must somehow complement each other. He became interested in religion as a boy, during a Christmas mass at the village church, where he saw an oval icon of the Virgin Mary surrounded by saints with the symbols of their martyrdom. Roofs were a passion that developed later on, during the latest reconstruction of the mansion, when the entire roof had to be replaced with modern tiles. Whatever Jonas Gustaw Wolfgang did, it always had to be done precisely, carefully and painstakingly. So he read about roofs, coverings, tiles and shingle. In a revolutionary act of boldness, which was the flavour of the *Zeitgeist* at the beginning of the century, he decided to replace the traditional flat, scale-like tiles for more versatile brick-red tiles in the Gothic style, a reference to the architecture of the West. From then on the mansion was a curiosity in Silesia because of its roof tiles. Neighbours, priests and architects came from near and far to admire it. The mansion looked like a Burgundian château, like a Bavarian priory.

Wherever Jonas Gustaw Wolfgang went, his eyes sought out the rooftops. From inside trains his gaze would gradually, almost inadvertently, wander along the upper reaches of each town they passed, taking in every chimney and every slope. Just by looking at the roofs, Jonas could establish which part of Europe he was in.

He studied in Lausanne and Geneva, where he got to know Freud, Frazer and Durkheim. Rudolf Otto, the German theologian, made a tremendous impression on him. Swiss roofs are among the finest in the world. They make roof tiles there out of

unusual, multi-coloured clay, so no roof is uniform in colour. The surfaces keep changing hue, with the thousand shades that the clay can assume producing an amazing patchwork effect. In Switzerland you should always book a room on the top floor of a hotel to get a view of these fascinating roofs. They don't lay the tiles the same way as in Silesia, but like scales, so the houses look like enormous fishes turned belly up, cast on to land from seas beyond the imagination.

Later on, in Heidelberg, Jonas Gustaw Wolfgang wrote a thesis on the life and works of the legendary Silesian saint known as Kummernis. He also lectured at the university and wrote articles, specializing in sects active in Silesia during the Reformation period, in particular the followers of Kaspar von Schwenkfeld and the Cutlers.

The roofs in Heidelberg are typically German – red and steel-grey. The slender coping on the churches is coal-black in colour, soothing to look at. After lectures Jonas would take a walk up to the castle and look down on the city, bustling in the evenings with students drinking cheap cider and discussing academic theories.

There are some tangential connections between religion and roofs. The first is banal – that both represent the highest sphere. This association leads nowhere, but there's another one that does have some significance. Jonas Gustaw Wolfgang thought of it one day as he was gazing down on the city from the terraces of that same Heidelberg castle – a roof, like a religion, is the crowning point that closes off an area, dividing it from the rest of space, from the sky, from the height and soaring immensity of the world. Thanks to religion we can live normally and not get upset by any kind of infinity, which otherwise would be beyond endurance; while thanks to roofs we can hide safely at home from the wind, rain and cosmic radiation. It's something like

opening an umbrella, covering yourself up, or closing a hatch, and thus dividing yourself off, escaping into a safe and familiar area.

The Cutlers

They spent their days singing psalms and making knives. They made blades better than anyone in the whole of Silesia and fitted them with carefully polished handles made of ash wood, which every human hand fell in love with instantly. They sold them once a year in early autumn when the apples were ripening on the trees. They held a sort of fair, which attracted people from all over the district; they each bought several knives, sometimes as many as a dozen, in order to sell them on at a profit. During these fairs people forgot that the Cutlers were of a different faith and believed in a different God, and that it would have been easy to produce evidence and drive them away. For who would make such good knives then?

Whenever they bore a child they mourned instead of rejoicing. Whenever someone died, they undressed him, laid his naked corpse in a hole in the ground and danced around the open grave.

Their settlement was at one end of a line of hills that divided two mountain chains. There was a stone building in the middle of a few small, windowless mud huts that looked like dog kennels. These huts were full of knives. They stored them the way cheeses are hung up for smoking, with the blades hanging downwards from the wooden ceilings. They swung in the draught, clanging against each other like bells. People walked fearlessly beneath this sky full of blades, the steel tips touching their heads.

They had a very curious belief about how the world began – they believed that all matter is the 'affect' of the spirit: the spirit grew forgetful, stopped concentrating and experienced something that it is not supposed to – an affect, that is, an overpowering emotion. (The theologians later puzzled over what sort of an emotion it might have been – terror perhaps, or maybe despair at the idea of existing and having no escape from existence? But there is no clear explanation.)

The Cutlers believed that the soul is a knife stabbed into the body, which forces it to undergo the incessant pain that we call life. It animates the body, while at the same time killing it, for every day of life takes us further away from God. If man did not have a soul he would not suffer. He would live like a plant in the sunlight, like an animal that grazes in sunny pastures, but because he has a soul, which at the very start of its existence once looked upon God's inexpressible radiance, everything seems dark to him. To be a small piece chipped off the whole, but to remember that whole, to be made for death, but to have to live, to have been killed but to remain alive – that's what it means to have a soul.

Morning and evening they chanted their mournful psalms – as they cut ash wood for handles, as they melted steel and shaped the blades, as they shook wild apples from the trees in autumn, and as they cared for their few children – those unfortunate creatures who had unwittingly come into the world.

They had eccentric customs, and their whole way of life was eccentric. Whenever they had intercourse, they took care to prevent the semen from reaching the womb. They spilled it on the ground as an offering to their God, imagining that divine radiance lay hidden in human semen, and that by making an offering in this way, they were releasing it from matter and returning it to God. This is why they rarely bore children.

Their only form of prayer was the lamentations they called psalms, while their only ritual was this spilling of their semen as an offering. Otherwise they did not pray; they thought of God as a superhuman being who had nothing in common with man and did not even understand human prayers.

The forest that comes crashing down

Marta isn't one for confidences, but she did once tell me that she could remember all sorts of different eras, even the ones shown in the votive icons in Wambierzyce. She recognizes an era not by the people who were alive then, because people are woefully similar to one another, but by the colour of the air and the leaves, the way the light fell on objects. She is absolutely certain about this: she says a particular period in time can be identified by shades of colour, and that is its only distinguishing feature. Maybe it has something to do with the sun; perhaps it vibrates and changes its wavelength, or the air filters the light some other way, giving all sorts of things on earth a unique shade of colour each year.

Marta learned to associate a detail in her memory that suggested an actual time to her with the colour the world was then. I imagine, for example, she might have associated the shape of a wooden cartwheel with the strange, reddish colour of the sky in the days when that sort of wheel went rolling along the stony roads carting hay, sacks of flour, clay for building houses or hastily loaded household implements. Or perhaps she would have linked a style of dress gathered high under the breasts with translucent, willow-green air, and the sky blue colour of frosty winters.

That's how Marta's memory works – that's how she recognizes the past. But this way of trying to organize time can be misleading, and Marta has sometimes seen images she doesn't understand, and that frighten her.

Once she saw a valley, over which hung a low, orange sky. All the lines of this world were indistinct and the shadows were blurred, cast by some alien light. In the valley there were no houses, no traces of humanity, not a single clump of nettles or a wild currant bush was growing. There was no stream, though the place where one used to be was overgrown with thick, hard, tawny grass, like a scar. In this world there was no day, and no night either. The orange sky kept shining all the time – neither warm nor cold, motionless and indifferent. The hill was still covered in forest, but when she looked at it closely she could see that it was dead; at some point it had hardened and turned to stone. Pine-cones hung on the spruce trees, and their branches were still covered in ashen needles, because there was no wind to scatter them. She had a terrible foreboding that if any sort of movement were to occur in this landscape the forest would come crashing down and turn to dust.

The man with the chainsaw

Noise always heralded his approach – a grating, mechanical howl that bounced like an invisible ball off the slopes of the valley and always came to a halt near the terrace. We raised our heads anxiously, the dogs raised their hackles, and the goats started up a terrified gallop around the tree we had tied them to. Only later did he appear in person – a tall, thin man who emerged from the forest, brandishing a chainsaw as if it were a powerful rifle and as if he had not come out of a birch copse at all, but straight from a

battlefield, from among burning tanks, or the rubble of blown-up bridges. His gestures suggested triumph – the way he wielded that huge piece of iron, giving a quick squeeze on the trigger now and then to make a noise that split the entire valley in two. 'Hello there,' he cried cheerily, 'I'm on my way!' And he came down the slope, straight towards us, waving the saw and hacking at birch seedlings, young maples and clumps of grass. There was a sort of over-the-top swagger to his movements, an exaggerated vigour, causing him to get his feet tangled in the grass, and he fell down. We closed our eyes to avoid seeing him injure himself on that long naked blade, but nothing happened to him. He got up, surprised by his fall, but forgot it at once, because he could see us on the terrace – all those curious eyes watching him, all those hands ready to applaud him. As he crossed the road and stepped on to our path we could see that he was drunk. The saw swung around him in irregular, ominous circles as if wanting to escape its frenzied owner. 'Anything you want sawn up?' he asked cheerily, sweaty, red in the face and rather shaky.

One time R. made the mistake of asking him to chop up a fallen cherry tree. Screaming and shuddering, the blade bit into the dead wood and cut it into uneven pieces, and when it had finished, not yet satisfied, it went on slicing up the air. The man's eyes were roving about the trunks of our lime and apple trees, until R. stood in front of him and shielded the defenceless trees from view. 'What about that ash tree,' asked the man, shaking his weapon, 'isn't it blocking your light?' R. escorted him to the road up the hill, accompanying him until he had scented out other opportunities.

The man with the chainsaw came back every now and then, and we would gather up the cups from the terrace in a panic and shut the door. We'd watch his disappointment as he passed our house, shouting out, 'Hello, anything you want sawing up?'

Ergo Sum

He awoke in sunlight. He was lying in a drainage ditch among tall plants. The road ran a couple of metres away; he could hear the clip-clop of a horse and the creaking of a cart. He was in nothing but his trousers, which were torn to shreds. The skin on his chest was smeared in what looked like mud and blood. He inspected and felt himself all over to check he was in one piece. He was, though he would have preferred to find the source of the blood on his body – he would have welcomed a scratch or a cut, but he wasn't injured.

He got up and his head began to spin. It hurt strangely, as if it wasn't his, as if the blood in it wasn't flowing properly. He was seeing stars. His biggest worry was how to get home, to his street in the centre of town, where at this time of day everyone would be out buying bread and milk or standing at the window gauging the weather, the men shaving on their balconies rather than miss a single moment of this beautiful July day. They wouldn't let him past in such a state, but would start asking questions about what had happened to him. They would be horrified by his apparent wounds and would call a doctor. Or maybe they already knew? Maybe the police were already prowling round the neighbourhood because a body had been found . . . Ergo Sum sat on the ground and looked at his hands – they were completely normal. Pulling himself together, he decided to go to the police station there and then and make a full confession. So he set off, comforted by the thought that he was finally going to confide in someone, that he was going to give himself up into safe, caring hands. 'I hope they sentence me quickly,' he thought, 'it's the black cap for murder, so let them sentence me and hang me for good and all, amen. But why did I have to go through so much, only to die like a criminal?' But it wasn't his problem any more,

he didn't know, he couldn't even guess. Some God would take responsibility for it, or some gods, endlessly enjoying themselves at feasts with their olives and their grapes – good luck to them.

He realized he was on Mount Anna. He was quite far from town, about six kilometres away. The old tourist trail ran not far from this spot, and only last year he had been here with the students. A stream flowed below him, crossed by an unusual arched stone bridge, which was marked on the map as the Book-Keeper's Bridge. Yes, he knew where he was. That hamlet consisting of just a few houses was Pietno. From here the road leads straight to the highway and on to town. He quickened his pace and then began to run.

In Pietno, just past the bridge, a silent group of people was standing on the small wet village green. When they saw Ergo Sum they moved aside, and between their legs he saw the large body of a dead cow. It lay on its side with its belly ripped open, and its intestines trailing over the blood-soaked grass. Ergo Sum instinctively clapped his hand to his mouth, but couldn't stop himself from taking a closer look. The people made some room for him. They all had ugly grey faces, greying hair and chapped lips.

'The dog's killed a cow,' said an old man with a lopsided face. 'Bobol's dog,' added a woman with a small child. 'Not my dog – mine was tied up,' said a man who must have been Bobol, but at once a scrawny fellow with a cigarette turned on him, saying, 'That's shit – you've only just tied him up.' 'Bobol doesn't keep an eye on his dogs. He doesn't even know how many he's got,' confirmed the old man, glancing at Ergo Sum.

Ergo Sum felt weak, because now he knew what had happened. He even thought he had some vague memories of the night, or maybe he just imagined them. He would have shouted, screamed and howled, but he seized himself by the throat to stop it from happening. It was an unusual gesture, and the people gave him

curious looks. Then Bobol, who looked like a gnome, tore himself from the group – he was small, stocky and unshaven. With a determined air, he went over to a large black dog on a short chain. The dog started whining and fell to the ground, clearly sensing its own death. Bobol raised a thick piece of wood, swung his arm and whacked it on the head. The dog screamed so piercingly that some of the women shuddered, then it gently rolled on its side and lay still. Blood began to flow from under its head.

Then Ergo Sum kneeled down on the wet grass by the cow's body and began to sob. The people stared at him in amazement and exchanged derisive looks. Their steely eyes were shining.

'Hey, mister, get a grip on yourself. Are you crying for the cow or the dog? Don't you feel sorry for people?'

Ergo Sum looked up into the face of the old man, seeking sympathy. Maybe he even thought the man would hug him to his chest and wipe the tears from his face. But the peasant's eyes were like knives.

Soon he was walking along the high street, but he was still in the suburbs. As he passed the Lido pub, closed at this time of day, his tattered thoughts hovered around Plato, who was wise and calm as a Greek god; no, he decided that was a bad comparison, because the Greek gods weren't wise or calm. But the world was different then, though it wasn't clear at whose behest; the sun shone golden and peach, the olive trees grew green on the hillsides, people had fair skin and white robes. This vision gradually appeared in his mind on top of the image of the dead cow, the murdered dog and the faces of the people in Pietno, until one scene merged with the other, goodness only knows how – the mental picture of Plato raising an olive to his golden lips, and at the same time of Pietno, became the preface for Ergo Sum's future.

People stared at him, but he didn't really notice – they did it discreetly, out of the corner of their eye, as if not wanting to

embarrass him. But several times he heard: 'He's drunk! Mr Sum the teacher's drunk!' He clenched his teeth and was already at the crossroads by the statue of Saint John of Nepomuk when it occurred to him that he should wash before going to the police, so he automatically turned towards home. The stairwell door closed benevolently behind him. He pressed his dirty fists to his eyes because he felt unable to hold back the tears any longer. What would Plato have done in this situation? 'He'd have committed suicide,' Ergo Sum answered himself. He'd have cut his veins like Petronius, he'd have done it at a feast, among friends, in bright open atria with golden air, wine, olives and so on. He'd have joked as he died, like Socrates.

Oh, how Ergo Sum longed for death! He imagined himself dangling from a rope on the veranda. But he didn't kill himself, or go to the police. The chair in the kitchen, the one that he had tied himself to so carefully, mercifully received his exhausted body. He sat without moving until morning.

In the morning he washed, packed a couple of pairs of trousers, some underwear and a sweater into a small suitcase, locked up his flat and went back to Pietno. There he managed to convince the dwarf-like Bobol that every farmer needs a strong farmhand, if only to bury dead animals. Bobol eyed him with suspicion, but when it became apparent that he didn't want any money, just a corner to sleep in and something to eat, the farmer agreed, his grey eyes glittering craftily like a wolf's.

Half of life takes place in the dark

It's true, whether we're aware of it or not, whether we like it or not. But most people's only memory of the night is the result of insomnia – anyone who sleeps deeply doesn't really know the night.

Ergo Sum became Bronisław Sum, or Mister Bronek for short. He welcomed this normal, new name with relief. The people in Pietno added the word 'Mister' because he had fine hands and his temples were going grey. Only Bobol called him plain Bronek, as he ordered him to muck out the cowshed, fetch water for the cows, and turn the hay, which never completely dried out in Pietno because of the incredible dampness of the place.

Nowadays Mister Bronek had to get up at dawn to milk the cows. He learned how to do it easily – he only had to see the cows' udders as fleshy tanks full of liquid and gently squeeze them until the thin white stream rang against the sides of the bucket. Then for his breakfast he drank the milk, which was warm and smelled of manure. Next he drove the cows out to the meadows, and the horse, who nodded his head up and down as if bidding him good-day or saying thank you. Then he went back to muck out the stable and cowshed. There was so much manure in them that hadn't been cleared away for years that it had gone hard and solid, so he cut it up with a spade like peat, loaded it into a wheelbarrow and carried it in front of the house, where he piled it up in a heap. Around noon he went home, peeled and boiled some potatoes, poured dripping over them and served them up with some buttermilk. He and Bobol ate in silence, while Bobol's dogs watched them from the hallway, small, big, young and old, eternally hungry. No one knew how many there were. After dinner Bobol lay down for a short nap, while Mister Bronek sat on the steps and gazed at the undulating line of the horizon, the crumpled plains of grassland and mountain pasture. Then it was time for milking again, straining and boiling, filling the milkcans, turning the hay and removing barrowloads of manure. Supper was bread with brawn or sausage; then Bobol went to the neighbours' to drink, and the night began.

The night always hatched somewhere down by the stream, and it was from that damp, cool spot that the sky began to go dark. Every evening Mister Bronek witnessed this transformation, as he sat on the steps in front of the house and watched. First he heard the regular cry of a night bird that sounded like a screechy clock ticking. Then, as total darkness fell, he started to hear people. Their drunken voices stammered in the darkness, dull, helpless and stinking of hastily home-made alcohol. As ever, Mister Bronek tried not to think, or at least to think as little as possible – about what he had to do tomorrow, whether he should go to bed now, what was wrong with the black cow, or where Bobol might have put the pitchfork. Finally he went upstairs to bed, where he drank in the smells of dampness and manure until morning.

But there were other nights too, crystal clear and eerie, when Mister Bronek couldn't sleep. In a dreamlike state he felt a craving for some tea; the saliva welled up in his mouth, and his throat felt constricted. He kept tossing and turning, feeling more and more disturbed, and his legs tingled as if they wanted to rush headlong down the stairs and out across the yard. I can't bear it, he thought, because it was like a painful need to urinate, something inevitable that demands an outlet and refuses to be quiet.

Then he went to the forest and wandered among the trees, kicking their trunks and clenching his fists so tight that his fingernails cut into his skin. He remembered being on the edge of the forest at a little wayside shrine that barred his way like the ticket booth at a stadium. The plaster was flaking off it and the stone was crumbling, and inside loomed a crucified figure with chipped feet. He went past it reluctantly and on uphill towards the border. The only thought in his muddled head was the hope of hearing a shot, and for that shot to be aimed at him, to hit

him, and to go straight through his head with a monstrous crash before anything could happen.

But the same thing always did happen – first he felt pain throughout his body, then nausea, until he was just about to vomit, but as soon as his stomach began to convulse his mind went dim and the last thing he saw, terrified out of his wits, were claw-tipped paws and grey tufts of ruffled fur. From then on he was in the grip of a desire that didn't enslave him, but rather set him free.

Sometimes his master, Jasiek Bobol, felt like having a chat. He would take out a crumpled packet of 'Sport' cigarettes and light two before saying anything. They'd sit on the doorstep with the draught at their backs and their bums freezing on the eternally cold stone. Jasiek Bobol knew nothing but bad news. He said that on the radio they had talked about a woman who lives in the Bieszczady forest and prophecies the future. One time three tourists went there, and ended up having to stay the night at her little cottage. She gave them some milk, and then said, 'I'll tell you the future, but first you must buy me some shoes.' So they sent the youngest down to the village, where he bought her some plimsolls. The old woman put them on and showed the tourists three coffins. One was full of grain, the second was full of chaff, and the third was full of blood. That was how three years would look, she said. Which years? the tourists wanted to know, but she wouldn't reveal that secret. All she said was that one year there would be a bumper harvest, the next the fields would yield nothing but chaff, and in the third year blood would flow. Whose blood? they asked, but she wouldn't say, so now Bobol was trying to work out what this year would be like – full of grain, chaff or blood. But the future always looked grim in Pietno. The grass was full of slugs, the water in the stream was muddy, the people were bloated, hungover or sick. A ewe had

dropped dead in mysterious circumstances, a marten had eaten the chickens, lightning had killed a cow and a litter of puppies had drowned during a storm. There was always the most rainfall here, so everything made of metal grated with rust, and the cowpats, encrusted with white mould, never decomposed.

Bronek was the one who buried the carcasses by the stream. When Bobol's ever-hungry dogs brought in a mutilated deer from the forest, Bobol wouldn't let them eat it. An unexpected tenderness shrouded his eyes, watery from alcohol, and he told Bronek to bury the deer. By now Bronek was well qualified as gravedigger for dead animals, but it's hard work burying the body of a deer – you have to dig a deep hole, because a deer has long, stiff legs that don't fit in any old grave. To make sure the dogs don't dig it up again, you have to break its slender shanks with a spade. That was what Bronek did, and even though the deer was undeniably dead, breaking its legs was horrible.

He was thinking about it the first time he took the bus to Kłodzko to give blood. The idea had suddenly come to him one night when he was in such severe pain that he wanted to howl. Maybe the local radio had suggested it to him, by talking about voluntary blood donation, or maybe a scrap of newspaper had fallen into his hands. He had already changed himself so fully into Bronek that he didn't give it a second thought. It seemed sweet and right to give someone his blood, something he had inside him that the world never saw and the sunlight never reached, but that made him alive. He liked the idea of letting those internal red rivers flow out of himself, sickeningly thick and warm, in the belief that someone would want them, with all their memories of blurred, white Siberian landscapes, soured by terror and tainted by lack of strength.

First a woman with white hands massaged the vein in his arm, then she stabbed it with a needle, and the plastic leech of a

tube drank up Bronek's blood. Afterwards he felt nothing but relief. He was given coffee and a bar of chocolate that he ate at once, without even tasting it. Later he felt a little weak as he clambered into the bus that took him back to the foot of the mountain.

From then on he gave blood two or three times a month, which was more often than he should. He could cheat because the blood donor centre's paperwork was in a mess, the white-fingered nurses kept changing shifts, and their heads were filled with other things. He couldn't wait to go again – to yield his arm to the needle and let out a stream of blood. He even enjoyed feeling dizzy; it was the only luxury available to him. He learned to add up his donations, one hundred, then two hundred grams of blood, the red juice that his body so persistently produced. One night as he listened to the shrieks of his drunken neighbours he calculated that he had given two bucketfuls of blood – and he still hadn't died.

Mushrooms

August began with mushrooms, in other words as usual. The sun was shining and drying out the ground, but our meadow was still full of water; lush, dazzlingly green grass was growing there.

I found the first mushroom by accident, right by the path to Marta's house. It was a small orange birch boletus, looking like a large matchstick, and above it the sky was like the side of a matchbox. It could have been a portent of the fires that burn the grass and turn the sky orange.

All morning I could think of nothing but mushrooms. During the night I thought I could hear them growing. The forest was

crackling with a barely audible sound – perhaps I sensed it rather than heard it – so I couldn't sleep. The first year I found the number of mushrooms in the local forest intimidating. I brought home whole basketfuls, spread them out on newspapers and inspected my collection for as long as I could, until the moment came when I had to take a knife and cut up their soft, childish bodies, chop off their caps and spike them on blackthorn spines to dry out. The prickly branches with all the mushroom caps speared on them leaned against the walls of our house all autumn, steeping them in the odour of dried boletus. That was the first year, when everything was abundant, the apples, and the plums – even the old cherry tree fruited like mad and fed all the starlings in the neighbourhood. Ever since there has been less and less of everything. This year I only found a few apples. I counted them and kept an eye on them – I would have been quite prepared to set the dogs on anyone who tried to steal them.

Despite the damp there were no parasol mushrooms in the meadows, although their time had come. August always starts with their white caps on the edge of the woods.

The parasol is a mushroom that has no youth. It's already old when it emerges from the ground, looking like a white sheepskin hat. It has an elderly body, the body of an old lady; it reminds me of Marta. Its thin, veiny stalk holds up a fragile cap that always feels slightly warm to the touch. You have to kneel down and sniff it before snapping the brittle stem and taking it home. Everyone knows how to cook parasols – you soak them in milk, then dip them in egg and breadcrumbs and fry them until they're as brown as chops. You can do the same thing with a panther amanita that smells of nuts, but people don't pick amanitas. They divide mushrooms into poisonous and edible, and the guidebooks discuss the features that allow you

to tell the difference – as if there are good mushrooms and bad mushrooms. No mushroom book separates them into beautiful and ugly, fragrant and stinking, nice to touch and nasty, or those that induce sin and those that absolve it. People see what they want to see, and in the end they get what they want – clear, but false divisions. Meanwhile, in the world of mushrooms, nothing is certain.

Once August had started, on most days hungover men went stumbling about the birch copses at dawn, then brought bags of mushrooms to our door, wanting to swap them for a bottle of home-made wine. 'Be my guest,' I usually said, but I was disappointed – they only picked king and birch boletus.

But I have eaten all sorts of mushroom. Whenever I find something I don't recognize, I break a little bit off and put it in my mouth. I wet it with spittle, rub it against my palate with my tongue, taste it and swallow it. And I haven't died of mushroom poisoning yet. So I learned to eat *Russula aeruginea*, which no one picks and which turns the whole forest yellow in August, and I learned to eat *Helvella crispa*, which has exotic enough shapes to provide an architect with an example of a perfect structure. And amanitas, wonderful amanitas – once I fried their caps and sprinkled them with parsley. They were far too delicious to be poisonous. I waited all night, then a second night, and a third, because the symptoms of poisoning can be very slow to appear. At dawn I was staring at the reflection of the window, a brighter patch of wall with a cross at its centre. The car keys lay on the table just in case, but those mushrooms didn't want to kill me. R. said calmly that if any symptoms of poisoning were to appear, it would certainly be too late by now. Pumping out my stomach and putting me on a drip would be pointless – the poison would already be in my blood stream.

'Why should anything wish me dead?' I asked him. 'Am I so important that anything would want to kill me?'

When I was small I ate some young puffballs. They looked so beautiful, so perfect amid the chaos of the grass that I excitedly bolted them down – I can still remember their powdery taste. I took some home and my mother told me to throw them away. I didn't tell her I had more of them in my stomach. Since then I have learned to eat them fried in butter with a sprinkling of sugar.

I took the first puffballs I found this year to Marta's house. We made a sweet dessert on the spot and ate them up.

Sweet puffball dessert

young white puffballs
butter for frying
caster sugar

Chop the puffballs into slices the thickness of coins. You don't have to peel the mushrooms, but just cut off the rough warts. Heat the butter in a frying pan and fry the puffballs until golden. Sprinkle in caster sugar and serve with a cup of tea.

Who wrote the life of the saint and how he knew it all

Wearing a dress was like wearing a habit. The only differences were that the dress fitted on the waist – which was rather unpleasant at first, because it was tight – and was cut low on the chest, which had to be covered up with something. Katka found a faded woollen scarf and tied it round Paschalis's slender shoulders.

He didn't emerge from the room for several days. Katka brought him food, mainly bread and milk, saying, 'Drink up your milk and you'll grow breasts,' so he drank it. In the morning, or rather somewhere around noon, when they got up, she skilfully styled his hair, tying plaits on the crown of his head and curling his locks on her fingers. With the money she earned she bought him a crimson ribbon. Her speech was full of Czech words, and he didn't always understand it all. She disappeared for the whole afternoon and evening, so he took the saint's works from his bag and read them again carefully, word by word, searching for anything he may have overlooked before.

Kummernis wrote contradictory things, which Paschalis found very disheartening. 'God is a vast creature that is pure respiration, pure digestion, pure ageing and pure dying,' she wrote. 'Everything is contained in God, but is multiplied, and thus intensified, perfect and imperfect all at once.' Elsewhere she wrote: 'God is perfect darkness,' or: 'God is a woman who is constantly giving birth. Lives pour from her incessantly. There is no respite in this endless procreation. That is the essence of God.'

'So who is God then?' asked Katka sleepily when he read it to her.

He didn't know how to answer.

'Have you ever thought about the fact that inside your body it's completely dark?' he asked her, as they lay curled up together on the mattress. 'The light can't shine through your skin. Down there, where men enter you, it must be dark too. Your heart works in the darkness, just like all your other organs.'

It was meant to be an ordinary question, but they were both terrified by this idea.

Katka cuddled up to him more closely.

'I'd like to be wise and learned,' he said. 'I'd like to know everything, then we wouldn't have to lie here and be afraid. It's

a pity we don't know anything about the people who lived before us, or those who will live after us. Maybe everything repeats itself somehow.'

The summer was over, and the warm, russet prelude to autumn was setting in. Paschalis was starting to pine for a wide-open space not hemmed in by city walls. He realized that it was pointless for him to stay in Glatz, and that he wasn't going to achieve anything there, either for the saint, or for himself, or for Katka, or for God. His journey had taught him nothing; he felt homesick for the convent, but he wished it were much bigger, as vast as the mountains, with open pasture instead of courtyards, so that everything else fitted into it. Mother Aniela would be his mother, and he would be someone else, someone like Kummernis perhaps, or Katka, or someone he couldn't even imagine. He realized that he must create himself over again, this time out of nothing, because what he had been until now was based on the one single misgiving that he had not been created properly, or perhaps that he had been created in such a makeshift way that he must destroy himself and arise again.

He didn't know how to start his destruction and regeneration. One afternoon when Katka was out, he packed his things and left the city.

Brother-Sister Fire – that was what the Cutlers called Paschalis when he found his way to them. The rain was lashing down, the well-trampled paths were running with red water and he needed shelter.

They weren't at all surprised by his clothing or his curled hair. They gave him a place to sleep in one of the little huts, where he felt as if he were back in his old cell, though he was still homesick. He lay almost naked on the bedding while his things were drying out by the fire in the stone house. It was so dark that he couldn't see a thing, and it seemed as if all his days

in the city had been brighter and longer, and the nights warmer, as if the rainfall had been different there, coming down in large, refreshing drops; even the milk had had a more subtle flavour. Cities seemed so fascinating from a distance – the road to Rome seemed so straight and easy.

They let him lie there for days on end while they worked; the men went to the forge, from where you could hear the rhythmical knock of the hammer and the hiss of water as it tempered the red-hot iron all day long. All the women disappeared into one hut together; maybe it was where they fitted the knives with handles or baked their pies. Their children played in silence, melancholy and grimy. Towards evening they were herded home like poultry. At daybreak Paschalis heard the Cutlers chanting plaintively. Their way of singing distorted the words, but whatever they were singing, it was full of grief and sorrow. What a miserable place, he thought, and waited for it to stop raining so that he could set off across the mountains.

Finally two days of bright weather came, when the air was sharp as a knife, and half the world was visible from the hill. Far away to the south Paschalis could see his convent.

'God has no features and no figure,' one of the gloomy men told him as he helped to chop up a cherry tree. 'He manifests Himself as and when He likes. Even the fact that He sometimes doesn't manifest Himself at all, when we think He should – that too is His form of manifestation.' For a long while he fell silent as they both inspected the fallen log, and then he added: 'God is inside us, but we are outside Him. He acts at random, but He knows what He is doing. He is like bread – everyone gets his slice and has his own way of looking at it, but no single slice makes up the whole loaf.'

They gave him some bread for the journey. The first snow had just fallen, but quickly melted because the ground was still

warm. As he went down into the valley and crossed the stream that he had known since childhood, he considered what the leathery old Cutler had told him. If God wants us to find peace, he thought, if He wants us to withdraw from the world and to elevate our souls to a spiritual, rather than a material plane, if He opens the gates of eternal life before us, if He allowed His Son to die and found sense in it, and if death is the most perfect peace, then indeed it must be the most divine of all God's creations. And if that is true, then a person can offer nothing dearer to God than his own death.

Every single thing is a sign, and some of them cannot be ignored – that's why sharp things exist, thought Paschalis, that's why the woods are full of poisonous mushrooms, that's why bush fires reduce millions of insects to lumps of soot, that's why floods rinse the life out of the valleys, that's why there are wars, lightning, catastrophes and illnesses, that's why old age exists, that's why the Cutlers hang thousands of blades from the ceiling and favour death.

God made the world like this so it would make us realize what we should do.

The end

There are two versions of the end of Paschalis's story. One is to be found, quite by accident, in *Über den selbstmorderischen Tod des Bruders im Kloster der regulierten Chorherren Augustiner in Rosenthal* and reads as follows:

'At the time of the morning office the provost noticed the absence of Brother Paschalis, who never used to be late for prayers. After the first two psalms, prompted by instinct, he went to his cell to wake him up, as he supposed Paschalis had

overslept. On opening the door he saw the body of Brother Paschalis hanging from a rail that served to hang clothes. Despite a rapid attempt to cut him down and save him, Brother Paschalis never came to, and soon after departed this life for ever.'

The second version is rather vague and has no proper conclusion. Apparently he wandered about Europe, perhaps the world too, preaching the creed of his saint mixed with the sorrow of the Cutlers. This version is current among people who were moved by the life and work of Brother Paschalis, after hearing about him by chance from foreigners, amid rumours, quotations, gossip, and other people's memories – no one really knows where they heard it from. Conversely, there are those like Professor von Goetzen, who discovered him while on the trail of Kummernis; he found his life of the saint in the university library and read it between cigarette breaks, while drinking from a thermos and nibbling at his hangnails. There is nothing about Paschalis's death in this version, but how could there be? The person telling the story is always alive, in a way immortal – he's beyond the reach of time.

The aloe

I suspect it of being immortal, somehow. It stands on windowsills and lets you propagate it by gently pinching off one of its dozens of side shoots. I have long since forgotten which plant is the mother and which the child. I have distributed it to friends from the city and to Marta, Agnieszka and Krysia, handing out cuttings in little clay flowerpots, or old yoghurt and cream pots, so thanks to me it has set off on its wanderings. I'm not sure how to calculate the age of these cuttings; whether I should only

count the years since the limbs were replanted, or the whole length of time its green flesh has existed. The limbs have their own time and space, which they soon outgrow, piercing it with their sharp edges; you could stick labels in their pots marked 'Specimen Y' or 'Specimen 2439', and thus follow the plant's development. But the green flesh that fills the leaves to bursting, that juicy, fragrant fluid that you can put on a scalded finger, and that sucks all the burning heat and pain into itself, is an immortal substance. It's the same stuff in every single aloe, in all the pots that have ever stood on all the window-sills in the world. It's the very same substance that sat in the window at my parents' house years ago, and before that in the window of the furniture shop, and before that, who knows . . . It must have done some travelling, obviously, because aloes don't grow wild in our climate. There must have been a ship that sailed along the eastern shore of Africa and squeezed its way through the Suez Canal, loaded with cocoa beans, exotic fruits, monkeys and vibrant parrots in cages. There must have been plant pots on the lower deck, containing sleeping aloes, immune to sea sickness, hesitant conquerors of new lands, soon to be the involuntary rivals of all sorts of other plants – myrtle, pelargoniums, rue and heather – and to become the inhabitants of window-sills, the gatherers of fitful northern sunlight.

I'm sure that things, quite casually, whether alive or dead, record images, so the aloe could still have the sunlight of its original home inside it, those incredibly dazzling skies and huge raindrops that silently wash away at the low coastal horizons. And each part of the plant takes pride in this shining presence inside itself, and duplicates the image of the sun, the god of plants, silently worshipping it from the window-sills of my home.

This evening when I took Marta one of these both-old-and-young plants, it occurred to me that it must be boring to last for

ever like that, and that the only feeling the plants can possibly have must be boredom. Marta agreed with me, and as she put the aloe on the window-sill she said, 'If death were nothing but bad, people would stop dying immediately.'

The bonfire

Last night the peasants from Pietno came to do a deal with us. We discussed it round a bonfire. They had bottles of vodka hidden under their jackets like a magician's white rabbit, and just as much of a joy to behold. They stood them on a makeshift table with triumph in their eyes. Marta and I sliced bread and extracted pickled gherkins from their jars. R. brought the glasses.

Mr Bobol, whose hair has grown down to his shoulders since last year, said: 'There'll be cocktails for the ladies – women don't drink neat vodka.' We didn't protest. I was worried that beetles would come and crawl over the tomato quarters we served, as there were lots of them about.

There were three guests – Mr Bobol, his neighbour Mr Żeżula, and Mr Bronek, whom everyone calls 'the farmhand'. We sat down on logs by the fire; the vodka was poured from the narrow throat of the bottle in silence. The men knocked back half a glass, while we sipped our cocktails, made with Marta's black-currant juice. We talked about the man with the chainsaw – apparently the police have hauled him in for stealing wood from the forest. It reminded me of early spring, of snow, and darkness lit by flashes of torchlight, the sinister rasp of the saw and the crash of a falling spruce. Never accost a wood thief, someone said, it's better to pretend you can't see or hear him. Trees are meant to be cut down – anyone who doesn't know that might

end up with an axe in his skull. So how many cubic metres of wood do you want for the living-room floor? we were asked. Let's have another round, said Bobol.

Mr Bronek was the only one who didn't drink. In the silence that fell at one point we heard him solemnly say, 'Do you know how much blood I've given?' No one knew. 'How much do you ladies think?' 'Ten litres?' I replied boldly. All faces turned towards Mr Bronek. He smiled and seemed to be smacking his lips. 'How much then, Bronek?' Bobol urged him to tell us. 'Sixteen buckets of blood.' Mr Żeżula said something about how many black puddings you could make from that amount of blood and lit a cigarette.

But Mr Bronek coughed timidly, as if expecting admiration. Marta alone, compassionate Marta, raked the embers with a stick and said, 'That's a great deal. That's a whole sea of blood.'

Bobol made us another cocktail. Only then did I see that it was almost a full glass of vodka, with a drop of water and a little of Marta's blackcurrant juice. I was unable to stand up.

To the Lord God from the Poles

They were amazed that it was all so badly organized, but what did they expect? The war had only just ended, and, as they made their two-month train journey across a country devastated by war, the piles of rubble they passed were still smoking. The train stood for weeks on end in sidings overgrown with grass, where cows grazed between the tracks, so they lit bonfires and the women made potato soup. No one knew where they were going. There was a train driver, of course, but he rarely put in an appearance, and when he did, kept saying mysteriously, 'Tomorrow we'll be off.' But when tomorrow came the train went

on standing there, and they didn't know whether to get out their hastily packed pots, relight the fire and peel some more potatoes for soup. He said there were whole villages waiting for them at the other end, empty stone houses with furniture and fittings beyond their wildest dreams, and that they could have the lot – they'd just go in and it'd all be theirs. As they breast-fed their children the young women dreamed of wardrobes full of silk dresses, leather shoes with heels, handbags with gold-plated clasps, lace napkins and snow-white tablecloths. They fell asleep with this image of household goods before their eyes, but when they awoke in the morning it was cold and wet with dew because the carriages had no roofs, just boards that their husbands had ingeniously made into rafters.

Sometimes the train moved off without warning, and anyone who was looking the other way had to chase after it, trying to pull up their trousers as they ran along the tracks. Lovers were left behind in haystacks, absent-minded old people got lost on crowded platforms, and children went crying after pet dogs that were busy marking the local trees. You had to shout at the engineer to stop. Sometimes he didn't hear or was in a hurry, and then you had to look for the train, catch it up, ask soldiers for a lift, make enquiries at temporary evacuation offices and leave messages on station walls. The worst thing was that the trains had no destination, no final aim; all they could be sure of was that they were heading west. They would turn left or right at junctions, but essentially they were following the sun, running a race with it.

There was no one in charge – there was no state, and the authorities were only just dreaming themselves up, but they suddenly appeared one night on the platform at a small station where the evacuees had been ordered to disembark.

'The authorities' was a man in jackboots, whom everyone

addressed as 'Chief'. He chain-smoked cigarettes – his lips had gone soft with smoke. He told them to wait, and they did, for several hours, until they heard the clatter of wagons looming out of the darkness; the horses were sad and sleepy. They loaded themselves on to the wagons in the dark and set off down the empty, narrow little streets of the town. The rumble of the wooden wheels was like the thunder of aeroplanes, and made the shop signs shake. A pane of glass fell into the darkness and crashed on to the paving stones. Everyone shuddered, and the women clutched at their hearts. That was when Bobol's old father realized that he was still afraid, that he had been constantly afraid for several years on end – but so what? A military jeep escorted the caravan to the suburbs, then out of town and down a cobbled road along a valley. Dawn was breaking, so they could see high, shady hills rising on either side. At their foot stood houses and barns, not village houses, but large brick farmhouses. Old Bobol's eyes were not used to such broad landscapes or to such houses, so he said a silent prayer that this would not be the place.

They turned gently uphill, crossed a bridge over a stony, turbulent little river and climbed on to a rolling plateau. To their right the sun was rising. It was only visible from up here, as it illuminated the distant mountains and the sky, mouldy with morning mist. The whole scene was gently undulating. It made the weaker among them, the women and old men, feel sick; the whole place was so empty and alien that someone even let out a sob, as memories of those gold-green plains they had left behind went through their heads – it was safe there, God's own land. Even the dogs that were running by the cartwheels kept close and didn't dive off into the grass and bushes. They sniffed the air anxiously, with their tails between their legs. Their fur was ruffled and dirty from the journey.

At last they saw a few cottages scattered along the valley below. The jeep stopped and the official in jackboots got out of it with a cigarette between his lips. He read the names from a list and pointed: Chrobak here, Wangeluk here, Bobol there. No one argued or protested; the official and his cigarette were like the finger of God – they created order, and whatever that order might be, it was sure to be better than disorder.

The Bobols drove up to their cottage. It looked solid enough. The barn was attached to it, not separate as it ought to be. There was a small yard paved with wide, flat stones, where the lilac was in bloom. They went on sitting in the wagon, no one daring to get down first. Bobol spat on the ground and stared into the windows of the house. Then he searched anxiously for the well, but couldn't see it anywhere; perhaps it was behind the house. Finally the jeep appeared and braked just in front of them.

'Come on then,' said the man with the cigarette. 'It's yours now.'

He stepped boldly up to the door, but seemed to hesitate slightly just before reaching it. He glanced over at them and rapped on it. Shortly after, the door opened and he went inside. They waited until he reappeared and impatiently urged them to follow him. 'Come on, what's the matter?'

They began to unload their eiderdowns and pots from the cart. Bobol was the first to enter the hallway. It was dark inside, with an arched ceiling, and the familiar smell of cows. Shuffling in the silence, they went on into the main room and stood facing the windows, so at first they couldn't see anything because the light was in their eyes. The official lit a cigarette and said something in German. That was when they noticed the two women – one old and grey, the other younger, with a child on her arm; another child was huddling up to the older woman.

'You stay in this room, they go in that one,' said the official. 'They'll be coming for them later.' Then he walked past them and disappeared. They heard the jeep rattle off.

They went on standing there, until a cat appeared out of nowhere, sat down in the middle of the room and began to lick its paws. The first to make a move was the old woman, who took the sheets and blankets from the bed and went into the other room, followed by the younger woman and the children. Then Mrs Bobol crashed about arranging her pots and pans on the kitchen range.

They spent the rest of the morning unloading their belongings from the cart. They didn't have much – a few items of clothing, some icons, the eiderdowns and some photographs in wooden frames. Mrs Bobol lit a fire in the peculiar range because she wanted to put on some soup, but she couldn't find the water. She went all round the house with her pot, and began to wonder whether they fetched water from the stream. Finally she plucked up the courage to peep into the other room where the German women were sitting. The younger one sprang to her feet at the sight of her.

'Water,' said Mrs Bobol, and pointed at the pot.

The younger woman moved towards the kitchen, but the older one growled at her. She stood still for a moment, as if hesitating, then reluctantly she showed Mrs Bobol a lever in the wall by the stove, on which Bobol had already hung up his trousers. She placed the pot under it and moved the lever up and down. Water flowed.

'Help yourself to the stove – it's already lit,' said Mrs Bobol to the woman.

When the German woman brought a large pot of potatoes and set it on the hotplate, Mrs Bobol explained to her that it clearly said 'temporary evacuation' in their documents, meaning that

they wouldn't be here for long, and that everyone was talking about the next war anyway. At this the woman burst into tears, without making a sound, swallowing her sobs, and as there was no way to comfort her, Mrs Bobol bit her lip and left the room.

They spent the whole summer living together. The men quickly assembled their alcohol-making apparatus, and from then on a thin stream of vodka flowed continuously into cans and jugs. They began drinking in the early afternoon when the heat became unbearable and they didn't know what to do with themselves. The women made dinner together in virtual silence, exchanging single words and reluctantly, involuntarily picking up each other's hateful language. The Poles eyed the Germans' habits with suspicion – how strangely they ate! For breakfast they had a sort of milky soup, for dinner jacket potatoes with some cheese and butter, and on Sundays they killed a rabbit or some pigeons and made barley soup. For their second course they inevitably had noodles, then stewed fruit. The men went to the barns to inspect the Germans' farm machines, but they didn't know what they were for or how they worked. They'd squat outside arguing about it and drinking their home-made vodka – that usually went on until evening. Finally someone would fetch an accordion, the women would come along and the dancing would begin. They turned that first summer into one long Polish holiday. Some of them were never sober. They just felt glad they had survived and had reached a destination somewhere, anywhere. It was better not to think about the future, because it was uncertain; better to sing duets, dance, make wild passionate love in the bushes, and not look those leftover Germans in the face, because it was all their fault – they were the ones who had sparked off the war and it was their fault the world had ended. Sometimes the Poles lost their temper and staggered home, took down the Germans' holy icons and threw them behind the cupboard, smashing the glass.

On the same nails they hung up their own, very similar, maybe identical Christs and Madonnas with bleeding hearts.

In autumn, tired of celebrating, and disappointed that the authorities had forgotten them, they nailed together a cross and erected it at a fork in the road with the inscription: 'To the Lord God from the Poles.'

The Poles didn't work that summer – while the Germans were still there they didn't have to. They gave the Germans exactly what they deserved – after all, it wasn't the Poles' fault they had ended up here, it hadn't been their idea to leave their extensive fields in the east and spend two months wandering about. They had never asked for these strange, stone houses. The German women milked the cows and mucked out the cowshed, then went to the fields or did the cleaning, scared, stooping and silent. They were only allowed to rest on Sundays, so they put on their best clothes, white gloves and all, and went to church to redeem their sinful German souls.

In autumn the official came back for the German women, and told them to get ready to leave. The young woman excitedly started bundling up her belongings, but the older one sat on the bed and didn't react. Next morning they were standing outside waiting. Mrs Bobol gave them dripping for the journey, and felt glad they would have an extra room now. At last a man came and told them in German to set off towards the town. Pulling along her cart, the young woman went and joined the caravan of other Germans who had stopped on the little bridge, but the old one didn't want to go. She went back into the kitchen and seized a china bowl; Bobol, already tipsy, tried to tear it from her grasp. They struggled for a while, until the old woman's white hair was ruffled and suddenly, for the first time in months, she started shouting. She ran outside, still shouting and waving her fist.

'What did she say, what's she yelling?' Bobol asked, but the official refused to tell him.

After the Germans had vanished over the hills the official came back to tell them that their village was no longer called Einsiedler, but had been given a new, Polish name – now it was Pietno. Bobol also found out that the old woman had cursed him.

'She showered you in curses – may your land be infertile, may you end up alone, may no illnesses leave you in peace, may your animals drop dead, may your trees be fruitless, may fire consume your meadows and water flood your fields. That's what she was shouting,' said the official and lit one cigarette from another. 'But only a fool would take any notice.'

The pewter plate

Marta has a lot of broken things: single cups, saucers with the pattern worn away, so you can only guess at the gilded meanders of leaves, tin mugs with makeshift wire handles, and pots with rusty marks where the enamel has peeled off. She has one huge fork with a swastika on it, and knives with blades so pared down by thousands of sharpenings that they look like skewers. I suspect that she digs them up each spring while working in the garden, washes them, polishes them with a bit of ash and tosses them in the drawer. If so, Marta could be self-sufficient in kitchenware. Our land has also given birth to some grotesque objects. We haven't treated them with much respect, preferring like everyone else to have shiny new things with traces of glue from the price sticker and a guarantee that they'll last, in the form of a perfectly smooth surface or the faintly metallic smell of the factory.

So I don't covet Marta's things, or her heavy pillows, in which the feathers wander about during their nocturnal wrestling with the human body, or her faded samplers embroidered in German with uplifting mottoes like: '*Wo Mutters Hände liebend walten, da bleibt das Glück im Haus erhalten*,' or '*Eigner Herd ist Goldes wert*.'*

There's only one object I'm fond of – a pewter plate, heavy and bulky, decorated round the edge with an embossed geometrical pattern worn down by the touch of fingers. The pattern is fading and melting into the background in so many places that I enjoy touching it and trying to identify it by feel, without looking. It is Greek in style, or art deco; it has alternating circles and squares linked by crosses that add them together like plus signs. In many places the gilt has come off, revealing bare grey metal.

In summer Marta puts fruit in it, and in autumn nuts. The plate reigns supreme at the very centre of her oilcloth-covered table. It is the only attractive item in her hoard of flawed objects. The rest inspire nothing but sympathy.

The nanny

I had a German nanny, whose name was Gertruda Nietsche. She was small and brisk like a rodent, and she wore thick glasses that reflected every source of light, from electric bulbs to the sun, several times over. She knew only a few words of Polish and used them mainly in conversations with my mother, while to me she spoke the way she thought, in German. I can remember her face well, her brusque-but-loving movements, the softness of

* *Translator's note*: 'Where a mother's hands are busy, there luck remains in the house'; 'Your own herd is worth its weight in gold.'

her cardigans, and a smell of cocoa, but I can't remember her words. In those days I didn't have any language at my disposal. I had no need for words yet, either Polish or German or any other. She had her own language, which to everyone in the vicinity sounded foreign, or even hateful (after all, it was only twenty years since the war had ended). She spoke to me, sang to me and scolded me in that language. She used to put me in a wooden pushchair and take me across the weir to visit her relatives the Kampas, the only original inhabitants left, and there, in their home full of knick-knacks, we joined in endless conversations – I, of course, remained silent.

During these conversations I sat on a bedspread, propped up on pillows, while Gertruda sat at the table with Mrs Kampa chinking their cups together. Then she used to take me in her arms, and I must have been reflected in her glasses, but I don't remember, because I wasn't aware of my own presence in reflections yet, and I didn't exist as far as mirrors were concerned.

Because of Gertruda I retain the hope that I might remember some German, that the language is lying dormant inside me, buried in the dust of innumerable conversations in Polish, the stacks of books I've read, from my Polish reading primer onwards; if not the whole language, then at least enough of the most important words to get by. I'm just waiting for this language to come to the surface, without the help of textbooks and boring lessons. I'm hoping I'll suddenly start to understand it out of the blue, and maybe even start to speak it, though that's sure to be difficult, as my lips and tongue aren't used to making foreign shapes. I'm sure I would understand German if someone – like Gertruda – were to lean over me, caress me and feed me, or show me the park, and ask the sort of silly questions adults ask children, 'And what's that? Who's coming? Where's Mummy?' I'm sure I would also understand it

if they were to let me feel the unique contours of their face, or if they were the last image I saw before falling asleep, and the first on waking.

At the Kampas I gained my first visual memory of myself. I would have been about a year old then, because I was already sitting up. It must have been the same itinerant photographer who took my photo in the first class at school several years later. He must have amused and cajoled Gertruda, and talked her into it, because she undressed me and sat me on a white fur. I'm sure I must have screamed in protest, because I was given a saucepan lid to play with. What with the touch of that lid against my naked belly, the bright lamp and the eye of the camera aimed at me – with all that attention focused on me – for the first time in my life, rather shakily and uncertainly, I stood outside myself and looked at myself through the eye of that lens, taking a view other than my own, a cold, distant, dispassionate view. From then on this viewpoint inside myself, that I look out from, would appear more and more often, until finally it would start to change me; I would start to be unsure who I was and where my centre was, the point around which everything else was arranged. Each time I looked at the same things, I would see them differently. At first I would get lost in it all, I'd be terrified, desperately searching for constancy. Finally I'd realize that constancy really does exist, but way beyond my reach, while I'm like a stream, like the river in Nowa Ruda that keeps changing colour, and the only thing I can be sure of is that I'm flowing through a point in space and time, and I'm nothing more than the sum of the properties of that place and that time.

The one advantage to emerge from this is that the world seen from a different viewpoint is a different world, so I can live in as many worlds as I am able to see.

The Cutlers' psalm

Futility on all the earth
blessed be barren wombs
holy be all sterility
sacred is decay, desirous is decline
wondrous the fruitlessness of winter
the empty shells of nuts
logs burnt to ashes that still keep the shape of the tree
seeds that fall on to stony ground
knives gone blunt
streams run dry
the beast that devours another's offspring
the bird that feeds on another's eggs
war that is always the start of peace
hunger that is the beginning of repletion
Sacred old age, daybreak of death,
time trapped in the body,
death sudden, unexpected,
death downtrodden like a path in the grass
To do, but have no results
to act, but stir nothing
to age, but change nothing
to set off, but never arrive
to speak, but not give voice

Treasure hunting

In time the German houses grew more willing to surrender their contents to their new Polish owners – pots, plates, mugs with

handles, bedding, and clothes that were almost new, some of them truly elegant. Sometimes they found simple wooden toys that they gave to their children – after years of war this was real treasure. The cellars were full of jars of jam, purée and apple wine, berries preserved in sugar with juice thick as ink, yellow chunks of pickled melon that they didn't much like the taste of, and spicy marinated mushrooms. Old Bobol, who was growing more and more gloomy, found a newly finished coffin down there.

The Germans had left spices, salt-cellars, oil at the bottom of bottles, containers full of buckwheat, sugar and ersatz coffee in the sideboards. They had left curtains in the windows, irons on the hotplates, and pictures on the walls. Bills, rental and sale contracts, christening photos and letters lay about in drawers. Some houses still had books, but they had lost their powers of persuasion – the world around them had moved on to another language.

There were children's prams, piles of yellowed newspaper and broken suitcases full of Christmas tree baubles in the attic. An alien smell still lingered in the kitchens and bedrooms, emanating most strongly from the wardrobes and chests of drawers. The women opened them timidly and fetched out articles of clothing, one by one, with some amazement because the clothes were so foreign, strange and funny. Finally they plucked up the courage to try on the dresses and jackets. They often didn't know the names of the materials they were made of. As they stood before the mirror, they instinctively plunged their hands into the pockets and were surprised to find crumpled handkerchiefs, sweet wrappers and old banknotes. The women showed a special talent for discovering closets no one had noticed, drawers that had been overlooked, and well-hidden shoe-boxes, from which children's milk teeth or locks of hair spilled forth. They ran their fingers over the patterns on plates, admiring their distinctive,

sky-blue symmetry. They didn't know what the gadget with the crank handle hanging on the wall was for, or what the labels on the little china drawers in the sideboard meant.

Sometimes, while sorting out the cellar or digging in the garden, someone found something special – a wooden box full of chinaware or a jar of coins, or a set of silver cutlery wrapped in oilcloth. The news went round the village in a flash, then the whole district, and soon everyone was hoping to find a treasure trove left by the Germans. There was a dreamlike quality to this treasure hunting; it was like tracking down the roots of a dangerous, alien plant that might start growing again one day, that might rob them of all their possessions and hound them back into homelessness.

Some people were remarkably blessed with these gifts, though not by pure accident. You could choose to believe their story that one day, while they were digging near the house, all of a sudden their spade just happened to clang against a metal box. But they could equally have taken a pickaxe and spade and headed into the fields, dug under one of the bigger trees or near a lonely shrine, shifted the stones in a ruined building, or explored an old well.

For the first year none of the men in Pietno sowed their fields – they were all looking for treasure instead. Only the women bothered to plant cabbages and radishes in their gardens. Every morning, at the first hint of dawn, the men set off on their treasure hunts. They looked as if they were going to work, because they had spades, pickaxes and coils of rope slung over their shoulders. Sometimes they teamed up in pairs or small groups and lowered themselves down into wells. Ever since one of them had found a metal box containing a hundred knives in the wall of a well – or rather, a hundred blades, because the wooden handles had crumbled to dust – they had

started investigating all sorts of holes in the ground. Those with foresight were already teaching their sons to look for treasure, because they thought it a very good profession.

Years later their grandsons were still looking for treasure; they bought metal detectors from the Ukrainians at the market and waded through waist-high grass, as if they were examining the ground through enormous magnifying-glasses. They spent their afternoons loitering outside the shop with bottles of warm beer, discussing the fact that yet another German coach had stopped on the road, and some of the Germans had gone creeping about in the bushes behind the church. Someone had seen them that night, shining torches and quietly calling to each other in excited whispers. In the morning there was a freshly dug hole in that spot.

The greatest treasure hunter of all was old Popłoch. He looked for treasure the way other people looked for mushrooms, and in both cases you have to have a nose for it. Every solid object in the Popłochs' house came from his treasure hunting – brass pots, plates and crockery, including a set of tiny cups so dainty that no one knew what to drink out of them. Anything that was subject to decay or putrefaction, however, had to be bought.

Popłoch used to wander nonchalantly about the fields and copses, staring at the sky as if scenting out tomorrow's weather. Then suddenly he'd come across a stone lying on the boundary between two fields, walk right round it and feel it, then dash home for his pickaxe and spade. Under this sort of stone he would find a suitcase full of cutlery, or a pot full of Nazi army badges. Two or three times in his life Popłoch found a gun. Each time he took it home, cleaned it, showed his wife and daughter how to put on the safety catch and hid it in the attic – with a gun in the house he felt safer. He had found a box full of

stamp albums and drove to Wałbrzych now and then to sell a few German stamps. He also sold apparently useless old objects, like wire-framed spectacles, to one of the antique shops there.

But when he found a real piece of treasure he didn't realize what it was. What would you think if you found a wooden box with iron fittings containing twenty-four place settings made of light metal, most of it coated in verdigris or tarnished? It was quite a nice set of plates, mugs, forks, knives, spoons and teaspoons, as well as some saucepans and pots with wooden handles. Mrs Popłoch used to boil milk in them – they were really solid and never got burned. They stacked all these items in the sideboard, where they sat quietly for many a long year, until martial law, when a dealer in old furniture came by and happened to notice the milk pan. He looked on the bottom for a mark, but he didn't say whether he had found one. When Popłoch showed him the whole sideboard full of the rest of the service, the dealer went silent for a moment, then offered him an enormous sum of money out of his own pocket. The Popłochs didn't bother to haggle; only their daughter was sorry to part with the silvery gleam of the pots and pans that, like the glow of the television, used to fill the room of an evening. But for the same amount she bought herself a living-room suite in Nowa Ruda, and still had enough left over for a three-day office outing to Rome.

If you had X-ray eyes and could light up the earth like the human body, what would you see there? Bones of rock, the clay of the earth's internal organs, livers of granite and hearts of sandstone, and the intestines of underground rivers, and some items of treasure buried in the ground, like implants or splinters of shrapnel.

Dahlias

Marta was sitting among the dahlias. I could see her head, and I waved to her, but she didn't notice. She was poking about in the leaves, tying them back perhaps, or maybe flicking the snails off them. She planted the rhizomes in spring and has taken almost as much care of them as of her rhubarb. They bloomed in August, and their petals were so even that I felt like counting them. Where do they get their perfect symmetry? Marta says dahlias are always more popular with children than adults. Why is that? No one knows. 'Adults prefer roses,' says Marta, because roses are so unpredictable.

I'd like to be old like Marta. Old age seems to be the same everywhere, consisting of long mornings, pleasantly protracted afternoons spent watching a sluggish TV serial with the blinds drawn down while the sun stands still above the rooftops. An expedition to the shop is a major event still being commented on over dinner. Being old means washing the plates carefully, and collecting crumbs from the table in nylon bags for twice-weekly outings to feed the pigeons in the park. Old age means inspecting the wound on the stalk of a croton that has lost a leaf in the night, shaking the aphids off the velvety leaves of a hibiscus, or putting the napkins straight; admiring the beetroot in the vegetable patch for managing to grow so large, listening to the radio with your hands idle, or planning some button-sorting for tomorrow. It also means worrying about the electricity bill that came yesterday, watching the postman as he zigzags from door to door, staring at the sky from the kitchen window and knowing every phase of the sun. It means opening the fridge casually to reassure yourself it's not empty, carefully tearing leaves from the calendar and putting them in a drawer, keeping museumfuls of old newspapers, and putting mothballs among

dresses that have gone brown with age, and are too small or too large to fit.

Then I realized that it's not that I want to be old – it's not a particular age I'm longing for, but a certain way of life, one that's reserved for old age, perhaps. It involves not taking action, but if you do, doing it slowly, as if it's not the result of the action that matters, but the actual movement, the rhythm and melody of the movement. It means watching the ebb and flow of time, but no longer having the courage to go with the tide, or against it. It means ignoring time, and doing nothing, just counting the strokes of the living-room clock, the pit-a-pat of pigeons' feet on the window-sill, and the beats of your heart – and then immediately forgetting them all. It means not longing or thirsting for anything – at most, it might mean looking forward to a holiday; after all, that's what holidays are for. Being old means swallowing your spittle and feeling it slip down your throat, or touching the skin on your hand and feeling how icy smooth it has become. It means cuddling up to your own knees, or remembering something in pedantic detail, from start to finish, until you nod off out of boredom.

The white fuzz on Marta's head shone silver among the flowers. It wasn't moving; maybe Marta thought that by keeping still she might defeat the hot weather. Maybe she was counting the flower petals, or maybe their beauty had simply taken her breath away. Suddenly, for a brief instant, I knew exactly what she was thinking. The thought appeared in my head, pushed its way forward among my own, exploded and vanished. Surprised, I froze on the spot with my hand raised to my eyes.

Marta was thinking, 'The most beautiful petals are the ones chewed jagged by snails. The most beautiful are the least perfect.'

Stuffed amanitas

three large fresh amanita caps
five hundred grams of dried amanita
two rolls
a glass of milk
one onion
parsley tops without stalks
a whole egg
an egg yolk
breadcrumbs
salt and pepper to taste

Soak the rolls in the milk. Fry the onion in fat, add the soaked and finely chopped dried mushrooms, beat in the egg yolk, add the chopped parsley, and season the stuffing mixture to taste. Coat the mushroom caps in egg and breadcrumbs and fry until golden. Fill with stuffing and bake *au gratin* in the oven.

A he and a she

They came here just after the war, as evacuees from the east. They fell in love – amid empty houses and empty streets, their empty hearts were ready for love. Nothing existed properly yet – it was all just starting to gear up for normal existence. Trains ran without a set timetable, someone still fired the occasional shot at night, and it was hard to understand the German signs above the broken shop windows.

Her slender, well-groomed hands, that even the war hadn't ruined, found work among the little medicine bottles in a

pharmacy embellished with Asclepius's serpent. For the first few months she stuck on German labels and wrote in the Polish names. He meanwhile, in his glossy knee-high boots, was busy reviving the mine. They got married two months after meeting, and were allocated a house, into which they moved furniture from some abandoned flats near the marketplace – a mahogany sideboard decorated with little turrets, huge still-lifes in heavy frames, a desk full of papers and photographs that she used to light the fire, and some leather chairs with worn, shiny arms. Both of them had always dreamed of such a home; it had a narrow stairwell lit by colourful stained-glass panels in the front door, a solid staircase with a handrail, a hall full of mirrors too huge to have been looted, a living-room with a veranda and sliding doors, and a large cool kitchen with tiled walls. The tiles showed rural scenes – a windmill in a cobalt blue landscape, a village by a pond, and hills criss-crossed by paths. The pattern repeated every few tiles, giving the room order. Each thing had to have its own special place, even the marble paperweight shaped like a scorpion.

From then on they were always attracted by pretty things: beautiful flats, and eye-catching clothes in the latest fashion – they were so elegant and refined, the opposite of uniforms, wartime rags and canvas knapsacks slung across shoulders. In the afternoons they went to neglected gardens and dug up flowers they couldn't name. They planted them in borders around their house like fortifications. Now as they played whist in the evenings they could smell the scent of the flowers, but half-way through dealing out the cards they'd want to go to bed and make love.

He was quickly promoted, and moved from the mine to Blachobyt, the biggest enterprise in town. She became manageress of the pharmacy. They went on shopping expeditions to Świdnica and Wrocław. They often went out walking, to show

themselves to the town, and so the town could show itself to them.

As they sauntered about in their bright, clean, fashionable clothes that seemed to give their faces a heavenly glow, the very sight of this self-possessed couple made you feel like kneeling down on the pavement at their feet and crossing yourself.

They didn't want children from the start. They were careful, took precautions and felt somehow superior to all those couples who lost control and got into trouble. They thought it banal to live like that, to produce a child and watch everything become an everyday routine – a stink in the kitchen of milk and piss, nappies drying in the bathroom, and an ironing-board and its unsightly metal frame as a new, permanent fixture in the living-room. It meant having to queue for veal, go to the doctor, worry about milk teeth and whether they'd come through yet. 'We're doing so well,' he whispered in her ear and, snuggling up to his manly chest with the scars she never asked about, she added, 'How could I share my love for you?' 'We'd be torn apart if we had to love someone else too – it would take up all our time and affection.' So condom wrappers lay scattered by their bed, and a douche stood on the little shelf in the bathroom – vulgar evidence of the fact that they had their lives under control, which meant they were free, really and truly free. They were among the first in town to have a car, and they used to drive to Kłodzko, sometimes all the way to Wrocław, to go to the theatre, or the tailor's for fittings when they needed a new suit, or a beautiful dress with a froth of petticoats. Whenever other couples, painfully growing older, asked them about children, they replied in unison: 'Why on earth have children in such uncertain times, in a part of the country that still doesn't fully belong to us, after all that happened during the war, after what they showed us at the cinema about the camps. What on earth should we have children for?'

But their bodies didn't give a damn about these questions or the war, and went on producing the raw material for children regardless of their views. Every month incomplete creatures were born in her ovaries, and millions of potential lives were produced in his abdomen. Occasionally these elements happened to join together in her womb, but since she didn't want to feed or nurture them, they mysteriously withered and were washed out by waterfalls of blood; so she sacredly believed that the world was subject to her will, and that if you don't want something, it won't happen, but if you do, it will.

In those days time was as volatile as mercury. Every day strangers arrived in the town and were sent to live in abandoned flats. The town needed new inhabitants, and there was work for anyone who wanted it. The schools needed teachers, the shops needed sales assistants, the pits were begging for miners, and the town hall for officials. The Blachobyt enterprise had come to life, a huge complex full of warehouses, railway sidings, administrative buildings, offices on the marketplace, machine shops and flax mills. Every day the train disgorged more travel-worn immigrants who filled the waiting-rooms in offices, then, documents in hand, went off to their accommodation. It was hard to get to know them, especially as they spoke various forms of Polish – with a sing-song Poznań accent, or a highland intonation that she thought common, or with an eastern lilt that would always remind him of his childhood.

One day, two women were assigned to live in their house ('temporarily', they said at the office when he phoned in indignation to complain). They came from the west, straight from a prison camp, and had lost their family somewhere along the way. The couple knew where these women had been and that they were coming back to Poland to live a normal life again, so they made them supper with wine and wore long faces. She put

on a dark dress, to avoid hurting their feelings by wearing anything too striking or garish.

But the sisters, identical twins as it turned out, looked quite all right, though their closely cropped hair, skinny bodies and poor teeth, like old people's, might have had bad associations. They wore tailored suits made of striped prison-camp material – snug-fitting skirts that went just past the knee and matching jackets with basques and leather belts. Their boots were so well polished that they shone, and their short hair was combed and parted with brilliantine, as if they were circus performers who walked the tightrope in skintight leotards.

She watched them from upstairs as they entered the house with their cardboard suitcases, and marvelled at their chic. One was called Lili, and the other something similar. That evening the couple were afraid they would have to listen to all sorts of horrors, but the twins didn't seem traumatized or even faintly dispirited. They never stopped joking, and on their dark faces their lipstick shone red. She found to her distaste that they behaved flirtatiously, as if they had just come back from a pleasant jaunt. She noticed that they had hand-sewn French pleats into the striped material, which had an elegant effect because the girls were so thin.

Some time later, when she let them use her Singer, in a flood of gratitude or a desire to be more intimate, they unbuttoned their blouses and showed her their skin – their bodies were covered in scars.

'Experiments,' said one of them. 'They did experiments on us.'

'They thought we shared a soul,' added the other, and they both burst out laughing.

She felt embarrassed and didn't know what to say.

The girls lived with them for a month, during which they filled out and almost blossomed. They went to the employment

office and got themselves jobs. In the evenings the couple heard scraps of their conversations, which were rapid, almost telegraphic, as happens between twins. One of them used to shout in her sleep, or maybe they both did – their voices were indistinguishable. Finally, they set off for Warsaw to look for their family through the Red Cross and announcements posted on walls.

So they had their house to themselves again. They bought an old German piano of a good make that didn't even need to be tuned. Only one key, one of the Ds, was silent, so every tune was inevitably fragmented because of that empty sound, which upset him. But she played it anyway, to give her fingers a change from sticking labels on medicine bottles.

Life was beautiful. All you had to do was take care not to say anything too loud or too often. It was best not to pass comment, not to make judgements, and not to hear or see too much. It wasn't difficult, as they had each other and the house to distract them, as well as the garden and the piano.

One day, without warning, everything became dark and unreal. This went on for several hours – one whole day and two nights of shallow sleep. Maybe the pressure had dropped, or maybe there was an explosion on the sun that only the astronomers and people in authority were aware of. Whatever the reason, from then on they both started forgetting what they had been doing all day. One day seemed just like another, identical twins, like Lili and her sister. The only evidence of the passage of time was the growing pile of dirty laundry in the bathroom. Work demanded total dedication, and you had to forget about everything else. Nowadays he had to travel with delegations to the Ministry or to Upper Silesia to see about some anthracite processing technology, or to attend endless conferences and political training courses. She had begun studying

pharmacology, to finish fixing what the war had spoiled, and to learn how to give each medicine a new, Polish name.

And then a lump the size of a plum was found on her ovary. They told her, 'You'll have to have cobalt radiotherapy, then you might also have to have an operation. We'll see.' She felt so miserable with this lump, so handicapped, that she thought about having a child, and felt that she would actually like to have one. She packed her husband's suit because he had to go away, ironed his shirts and bit her lip. He didn't notice that anything was wrong. She made her way to Wrocław for the hospital test alone, then came home tired. It was always cold in the house, as if it were snowing inside, though after Stalin's death everyone said that a thaw had set in.

One day, she was sitting on the open veranda smoking a cigarette and sunning herself, when she saw a boy walking down the street. He looked quite otherworldly – he had shoulder-length hair, a leather coat almost to his knees and an army knapsack. He must have felt her gaze on him, because he stopped by the garden wall. They stared at each other for a while and he moved on. She drew on her cigarette. A few minutes later the boy was by the wall again, and came up to the gate.

'I could dig your garden for you,' he said.

She got up nervously. 'Sorry?'

'I could dig your garden for you,' he repeated and smiled. He looked like a girl. He must have been about eighteen.

'All right,' she said.

She showed him where the spade was and watched him take off his coat and roll up the sleeves of his sweater. He dug methodically, and as he turned the clumps of red earth it shone richly in the sunlight.

She went into the kitchen and made herself some tea. She turned over a few leaves of the calendar, then went up to the

window – the boy was sitting on the wall smoking. He saw her and waved. She withdrew into the gloom of the kitchen.

When he had finished she offered him some soup. She leaned against the sideboard and watched him eating. His face was smooth as if he didn't have to shave yet.

'Apparently they've opened the border to Czechoslovakia,' he said. 'I'm going to Austria, then to Rome.'

She blinked in surprise.

'Where are you from?'

He laughed, and pushed his plate towards her.

'Could I have some more? I've never had such delicious soup.'

She felt herself blush. She poured him more soup and sat down at the table.

'So why are you leaving?'

'The war messed my life up,' he said. 'I haven't got any parents. I ran away from an orphanage and I want to get to the free world. I heard that they've opened the border. That's it.'

'What's your name?'

She noticed him hesitate for a moment, and felt sure he was lying.

'Agni.'

'That's a strange name.'

'I'm a strange guy.'

'How much do I owe you?'

'You can put me up for the night.'

She glanced at her painted fingernails and agreed. She opened up the downstairs room for him, the one where the twins had stayed.

'Good night,' she said.

She always had to dress warmly when she slept alone. She put on a thin cardigan and woollen socks over her flannel nightshirt, but even so she had to lie in the cold bed for about an hour

before she felt warm. She hugged a hot-water bottle to her belly, where the lump had settled. She wondered if the boy had fallen asleep yet. She felt like sneaking downstairs and sticking a hand into his jacket pocket. What would she find? she wondered. A pistol perhaps, or a wad of dollars, or a plush teddy-bear, some seeds perhaps, or a prayerbook, or maybe smooth, naked skin . . . Her thoughts began to wander, go misty and vanish. Just then she heard a rustling noise and sat up in bed. She saw a figure standing in the dim light of the open door.

'It's me, Agni,' she heard.

'What do you want? Get out of here.'

The figure floated out of the doorway and stood by the bed. In panic she switched on the bedside lamp. The boy had his leather coat on, and his knapsack on his shoulder.

'I came to say goodbye. The best time to cross the border is at night.'

'You'll get shot.'

He sat down beside her and stroked her neck with the back of his hand.

'Where's your husband?'

'In Warsaw.'

'When's he coming back?'

'On Monday.'

In shoes and clothing, knapsack and all, he slipped beneath her eiderdown. 'No, no,' she said, 'I can't, I can't.'

As he entered her she told herself, 'I'm dreaming, it's all a dream.'

In the morning she saw him through the bedroom window, digging the garden. She felt weak. She lit a cigarette and ran the bath, then lay in the water and gathered her thoughts Afterwards she found him in the kitchen, brewing coffee.

'I'm going to work, and you have to disappear,' she said.

He kissed her on the neck.

'That's not what you really want. You want me to stay here until Monday.'

'Yes,' she said, and cuddled up to him.

And so he stayed. When she came back from work they ate the rest of the soup and went into the twins' room, where they spent all evening making love. Then they drank a bottle of wine and fell asleep. In the morning she asked him, 'Who the hell are you? Where have you sprung from? What do you really want?'

But he didn't answer. On Sunday evening he went on his way, and she missed him so much she couldn't sleep all night. She felt as if she had known him for years, since childhood, or since before being born, if that were possible. If he hadn't promised to come back she'd have died – she'd have lain down in the twins' room and died.

On Monday everything was back to normal. Like a scene in a film, her husband came home on the morning train and sat on the sofa with his legs stretched out on the carpet. A bit of bare skin pinched by a sock suspender showed from under his trousers. His grey, zigzag-patterned socks showed the shape of his foot. He drank tea from a glass with a metal holder as he rested after his journey. She sat down beside him, and suddenly her face crumpled and she began to cry. He looked at her in surprise, then hugged her to his jacket that smelled of the train. Between sobs she told him that she'd have to go back to Wrocław for more tests, as if this were the explanation for her tears. As he stroked her hair he thought it had got thinner; he could feel the shape of her skull. He even thought of the word 'skull', and was horrified.

He decided to comfort her, so he stood up carefully, and took a grey paper bag out of his case. 'Look what I've bought you,

darling,' he said. 'It was meant to be for your birthday, but let's have your birthday today – why wait another month?'

He opened the paper bag and took out a pair of cream-coloured shoes, with a handbag to match, made of the same smooth, soft leather. Her tears stopped flowing as she looked at them. She put her naked feet into the shoes – they were a perfect fit. The high, slightly concave heels emphasized her slender ankles. She kissed her husband on the cheek, rough with stubble from the journey.

'You can wear them to the cinema. Let's go and see whatever's on, just so you can wear those shoes.'

When they went to bed she told him she had her period. In the night she thought she could feel the plum-sized lump inside her.

Silence

We haven't spoken to each other for days on end. R. has been away and is now back. He went to do some shopping and see to some business. When he left, the dogs saw his car off to the bridge and came back tired, squinting. The low, cold sun can only dazzle you now, not warm you.

Sometimes we only say one thing to each other all day long: 'Time to call the dogs in.' There's been no need to say anything else, it's all so obvious and has already been said long ago. When we haven't any visitors, each day is the same as the last; why on earth make trouble by speaking, why shatter this crystalline order?

Speaking does harm, sows confusion and weakens things that are obvious. Speaking makes me tremble inside. I don't think I have ever said anything really important in my entire life – there's

a lack of words for the most important things anyway. (I must make a list of missing words – top of it I'll put a verb that means something in between 'I sense' and 'I see'.)

Recently, we'd been silent for so long that when some visitors came to see us, we could only summon up laconic politenesses, such as 'hello' or 'welcome'. We kept our remarks as clipped as possible, saying, 'And you?' without 'how are' in the middle, because that would have been too much for us. 'Tea?' we asked, without offering them any other choices.

Then we sat down opposite our guests, in shadow, facing towards the forest, and said nothing throughout the conversation. R.'s silence is natural and innocent, as smooth as his skin. Mine is more gloomy, it comes from deep down inside me and drags me back in; I fall and get irretrievably lost in there. So we said nothing to the visitors, or to each other, or to anything around us.

When we made love we did that in silence too. There was not a single word, not a sigh, nothing.

A she and a he

When the time came for her tests, she had to stay in hospital for a few days, so he was left alone. He thought a housekeeper would come in handy, ideally an older lady who would make hare pâté and plateloads of piroshki, and speak in a warm Lwów accent like his mother. She'd light the stove and dust the piano. He promised himself he'd arrange it – then he wouldn't have to eat reheated chops and potatoes.

When he came home from work on Wednesday, there was a girl sitting on the doorstep. She had shoulder-length hair and a determined look on her face. She was pretty, even, as he noticed

at once. She was dressed oddly in a pair of work trousers, the sort women wore in factories. He stopped in front of her in surprise, and she looked up at him; her eyes were green and bright.

'Your wife asked me to come and clean and light the stove. Please would you leave a key for me tomorrow?'

He ushered her into the hall ahead of him. The girl went into the kitchen and started clattering about with the coalscuttle – she clearly knew the house already. He was finding it hard to get used to the idea, so he sat down at the living-room table and lit a cigarette.

'What's your name?' he asked, just for something to say.

'Agni,' she replied.

'Short for Agnieszka I suppose.'

She didn't deny it, but just smiled broadly. She had fine, even teeth. He could hear her bustling about the house, which was getting warmer and cosier. While she was in the bathroom he poured himself a shot of vodka and gulped it down, then pretended to be sorting papers at his desk. She brought him some hot stew and a cup of tea.

'If you like, tomorrow I can come earlier and cook something. I know how to make stuffed cabbage leaves,' she said, smiling, and sat down beside him as he ate.

'How did she find you? Where do you come from?' he asked with his mouth full of food.

'Oh, it was a coincidence. It's complicated.'

He noticed that she had a smooth, childlike complexion without a single wrinkle or freckle. A vivid image of her slender, naked body stretched out on the bed flashed through his mind, and he felt shocked. He said he was tired and was going to bed. She reminded him about the key and disappeared into the kitchen. As he listened to her washing the dishes he felt uneasy; he lifted the telephone receiver, turned the crank handle and

asked to be put through to the hospital in Wrocław, but no one was answering. 'I'll call tomorrow from work, I'll call tomorrow from work,' he kept telling himself. As he heard the front door slam shut below, he stopped on the stairs and felt the weight fall from his shoulders. He sighed and went back down to the dining-room, where he poured himself a vodka and switched on the radio. There was a play on.

'We can't be friends,' said a man's voice. 'You know it's true, Anna. But whether we're going to be the happiest or the unhappiest people alive is in your power alone. I only ask one thing of you: please don't take away my hope, please don't let me go on suffering like this. If that's impossible, then just tell me to disappear and I'll disappear for ever.'

'I don't want to drive you away,' replied an emphatic female voice.

'Just don't change anything. Just let everything stay the way it's been till now. Ah, here's your husband . . .'

He switched off the radio and went to bed. For the first time in years he had an erotic dream. He dreamed about the girl; it was the war again, and they were hiding from the Germans in some sort of factory. Water was pouring on to them from broken showers. They were naked, and she huddled up to him, her hair smelling of water. They seemed to make love, but it was strange – he couldn't feel it physically, he just knew it was love.

In the morning he called the hospital and spoke to his wife, but her voice sounded flat and metallic. She asked him to come for her on Friday. He quickly worked out that that was in three days' time. She also told him something about an operation, but he didn't understand properly and didn't want to think about it. He went home early and had a bath, then put on a clean shirt and waited, without knowing what for.

The whole thing happened as if it had been planned. Agni came in, wearing the same trousers as yesterday and holding a large cabbage. He stood behind her awkwardly as she was lighting the stove, feeling absurd. He said something, but was more concerned with looking at her hair and her naked feet in plimsolls. He simply couldn't move away from her – it was like in his dream, as if they were hiding from a hostile world, though he had no idea who that world was supposed to represent. She asked him to pass her a knife, and with that knife in his hand he went over to her and simply cuddled up to her slender body without warning; she didn't defend herself at all, but was soft, tender and languid, like a rag doll. He placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed her face. He expected her to resist, to say 'no', but all he could hear was her breath, which smelled of cucumbers, of something green and fresh, something he had always longed for. He laid her on the sofa, pulled off her ridiculous trousers and made love to her, even remembering not to get her pregnant.

This sort of thing does happen to people, she told herself as she planted marigold seedlings in the borders. A person changes and outgrows old situations, like a child growing out of its clothes. Time goes by and changes everything. There are big and small wars – the big ones change the world, the small ones change a person. That's the way it is; I'm not doing anything wrong, she thought, I'm not hurting anyone – at worst, I'm only hurting myself, by waiting and waiting like this

To her the world looked as if it had woken up. Its centre had now shifted from the house and garden to somewhere else, not to any specific place, just somewhere out there. As she planted the marigolds she suddenly felt imprisoned at home. She stood up and shook the dirt from her hands. She went indoors, sat at the round table in the living-room and began to leaf through

women's magazines in search of her favourite fashion page, but it no longer impressed her – it no longer gave her a thrill to look at beautiful, ephemeral clothes that would be gone with the next season. She had always associated new fashions with a sense of anxiety and urgency – sometimes she went straight to the fabric shop on the marketplace and bought the material most like the one in the magazine. Then she'd be off to the tailor's to place her order and even pay in advance, just to be sure she'd have that garment, otherwise she would fall out of step with time, slip from 'now' into 'then', into the realm of twilight and extinction.

All she saw were drawings and black-and-white photos of new dresses fitted on the waist and wide at the bottom, but they left her cold. She pushed away the magazines and went to have a bath. She examined her body and felt sorry for it – it was a soft, fragile thing, fallen prey to both inner and outer forces that were tossing it about like a tempest. All she could do was wait.

From early morning she waited anxiously, pacing from window to window in her dressing-gown, scanning the gaps between the garden railings. Sometimes Agni would appear, other times he would not – there was no rule. She had tried asking him questions about what he did, where he slept and so on, but he had just smiled in such a predatory way that she felt weak, and had to lean against the door with her eyes half shut. To her, the relationship wasn't to do with sex, rushed intercourse while imagining a thousand times over that just then her husband would appear in the doorway with his briefcase, like in a farce. She felt that Agni was healing her. His gentle caresses were like a cool compress, his kisses were like a hot drink; thanks to him her body was getting stronger, and not yielding to decay. It was plain to see. Agni laughed at the idea that she had filled out, went straight to the kitchen to eat up her food, and then vanished, simply vanished. She didn't even know where he lived;

maybe that was a good thing, because sooner or later she'd have gone there. And he had a sort of instinct – he always knew when to return, as if he knew the timetable of her life, her husband's work schedule, and could even read her mind, because whenever she was alone at home and thought of him he would appear, first darting past the railings, then quickly running up the steps, where she'd be waiting for him. 'Can you read my thoughts?' she asked him. 'Yes,' he replied. 'And I can teach you how.' Naturally she didn't believe him. 'You have to imagine your lover's face really hard, until you feel as if you're wearing it, as if it's your face. Then all her thoughts become yours.' 'And that's what you do?' 'Yes,' he said, and stared into her eyes. She could feel his gaze deep inside her body. 'You're not who you say you are,' she said.

The peonies were in bloom now, their petals dropping softly to the ground. The jasmine was still desperately pouring out fragrance, but was clearly at its end. A few days before going into hospital she went to church, but didn't dare enter the cool, dark Gothic chamber, because it didn't feel right, so she went into the graveyard, made sure no one could see her, kneeled down before a cross and prayed hesitantly, without conviction. In the evening she snuggled up to her husband, but his body felt too soft and smelled of cigarette smoke and machine oil. He wanted to make love, but she said no, because she felt as if she had already begun to die.

She thought of Agni as solid. His physical determination astounded her. His body knew exactly what it wanted, it went straight to the point, as if passing right through her, but without doing her any harm. It was pleasant and good. His touch mesmerized her; she couldn't find words to express it. Her husband knew how to be more sensitive, to wait for her, look her in the eye and drink in the pleasure from her face. But Agni was

self-absorbed, and that meant he was entirely real. He was slim, muscular and rugged. When she touched her husband's body afterwards (which she had once loved so much) she was surprised how soft and tender it was, like a fluffy pillow, a soft calfskin bag, an overripe peach, or her own flaccid belly. Her husband was herself; their touch ignited no spark, it produced neither heat nor frost. The only word that their similarity could engender was 'no'.

She saw him off across the hospital park to the entrance, where she stopped as if she were bewitched and could no longer cross the invisible line between the gate posts.

'Better not come and visit me,' she said. 'Ask Mrs Lisowska to do the cleaning; they make better food at your office canteen than I do.'

She felt tired. Why should she be worrying about the cleaning and his meals? He absolved her himself, by saying, 'Don't worry about me.' He was going to ask her about Agni, but she seemed to have forgotten. The thought of the girl made him feel anxious.

'Go now,' she said. He kissed her on the cheek and the hand, but she averted her gaze. 'It ought to be fair. They ought to cut your balls off too,' she said.

He felt as if she had hit him. He tried to move his lips, but words failed him, so he left. She watched him walk away, staring after his tall, broad-shouldered figure in an elegant summer suit. He must have felt her gaze on him, because he fumbled with his hat and disappeared around the corner.

The house was dark, silent and chilly. The office was bright, heated and full of people. There he buzzed with energy, spoke fast and loud, walked with a spring in his step and knew what he wanted. At home time slowed down, and everything else with it; there his belly sagged, his feet froze and his voice died down. There was no one to talk to or give instructions to. The border

between home and office ran somewhere across the marketplace, along the lines between the flagstones, and each day he had to cross it twice. This ritual became rather painful, so he took to putting off the moment by going to a restaurant for a glass of vodka. His first thought was to go to the Lido pub, as it wasn't far out of his way, but he realized that he would be breaking his own rules if he were to sit down at a wet, synthetic table-top among unwashed men from the suburbs, breathing in the fumes of beer and cheap tobacco. So he started dropping in at the Tower, still empty at that time of day, where the elderly waitress knew him and served him a glass of vodka and a plate of herrings in sour cream without taking an order. There he sat and gazed out of the window at the sleepy, small-town street. He couldn't fool himself – he knew he was looking for Agni among the passers-by. He wondered what else she did when she wasn't with him – if she really existed, if she had a bed of her own, a wardrobe for those funny trousers, or a bathroom where she kept her toothbrush. He didn't even know her surname. He could always check up on her, he could make enquiries – after all, the town wasn't big and everyone here knew everyone else.

'Who are you? Where do you come from? Do you have parents?' he asked her one evening as she cuddled up to him, smooth and dry as a lizard.

Whatever she replied, he knew she was making it up. She was totally alien, as if she'd been moulded from another sort of clay, and this alien quality of hers drove him mad.

'And who are you?' she answered with a question. 'Where do you come from? Where are your parents?'

He told her about himself more readily than he would have told anyone else. He found that he also learned about himself from his account, and he was surprised to hear himself say that he had always been the victim of one coincidence or another, of

chance encounters and chaotic upheavals. He wondered about this afterwards at the Tower restaurant, as he drank his single vodka. These conversations in bed, as they lay exhausted by sex, were an alternative sort of lovemaking, even a more exquisite one. They didn't require any flirting, tactical manoeuvres or courtship, just the opening of a sort of floodgate inside himself; it was like unblocking a dam and letting the words pour out. And those words already knew what to do, what sentences to form, what stories to create. He was grateful to her for lying there and listening. But what if she wasn't really listening? In that case all he needed was her presence: her boyish body sunk into the pillows, her warm, steady breathing and the fragrance of fresh cucumbers.

One day he measured her waist with his hands and, next time he was in Wrocław visiting his wife, he bought her a trendy gathered skirt with a wide belt at a department store. He could see she was pleased with it, because she spent a long time inspecting every detail of its simple cut, as if it were the first time she'd seen anything like it. When she tried it on he lifted her hair on top of her head and tied it in a ponytail, and that was how he saw her later, through the restaurant window, running along the street with the grey skirt swirling around her long legs. Before he'd had time to pay and leave she had vanished, but he knew she'd be back in the evening as usual.

He went to see his wife the day after the operation. He was shocked by her pallor, and the thought passed through his mind that she would die. It wouldn't be right to die now, amid all this confusion and silence. He was terrified that she would do it and leave him at the most dangerous moment – when he had already shed one skin, but hadn't yet grown a new one. He held her hand and called her name until she opened her eyes. She smiled weakly, and he was so moved by this sight that he felt like

crying. If they had been alone he would have let himself cry, but only a metre away stood beds, and on each one lay a woman's body, a soft, broken, perishable machine designed to transfer the generations through time, a flimsy little boat that sails from one shore of the night to the other, as people spill out of it. So he just bit his lip, and for a while his vision was blurred with tears.

'How are you coping?' she asked.

He nodded reassuringly.

'Apparently they've taken the lot out,' she said.

Unintentionally, he glanced at the spot where her stomach lay beneath the quilt, for some reason expecting to see a hollow there. He kissed her long, white fingers. He sat there for a while longer, until the ward rounds began and he was told to leave. He said he would come the day after next.

That was the day he bought the skirt for Agni.

There was no way to hold back the thoughts about the future that were swarming in his head. He imagined that she would die, and he and Agni would leave and go to Upper Silesia, perhaps, or Warsaw. He would have no trouble finding a job there, and Agni would go and study, architecture perhaps. He would buy her beautiful clothes and on Sundays they'd stroll down Nowy Świat Street, and all the young men would stare after them.

Even if she didn't die, in the end he'd leave her. He'd just leave.

Strangely enough – despite the distance between them – they had the same daydreams. She too was hoping she would die; it would be the best solution. The thought of going back to that large, chilly house, of getting up in the morning to go to the pharmacy, then doing the shopping on the way home, planting flowers, rattling away at the piano and leafing through magazines for all eternity, made her feel physically sick. Agni was all she longed for. Would she have the courage to tell him what they

had done to her, that she was empty inside like a husk, and would he then have the courage to plunge into the void inside her? The wound in her abdomen hurt – the stitches didn't want to heal, surely because death was in her thoughts. He could die too – his company car could hit a tree, or there could be an accident at the factory. She didn't feel guilty about having these thoughts – her conscience was taking her side now. One night she dreamed about the twins in their striped camp uniforms. They showed her the scars on their bellies. 'They did experiments on us,' they said, 'they took everything out – our hearts, livers and lungs, but it doesn't hurt at all.' From then on she started to get better.

While she was still in hospital he rented a small, damp room in the suburbs, with a private entrance through a courtyard dirtied by chickens. It had green walls with an uneven white pattern painted with a roller. There was an iron bedstead with a stained mattress, a bare little table and two chairs. On the wall there was a picture of Jesus preaching from the boat. He arranged to meet Agni there, but he couldn't make love to her; he didn't know why. He was overcome with despair for being unable to cope with it all, for ending up in this strange situation, with no way out. He huddled up to the girl's small breasts and wept. 'I wish she would die,' he suddenly said aloud, and was appalled by his own words. Agni pushed back his head to look at his face. Her pure young eyes seemed predatory somehow; he knew that look from somewhere. 'What did you say? Say that again,' she said. 'I wish she would die,' he dutifully repeated.

Agni's body was incredibly supple; it reminded him of a silk shawl that he could wrap himself in. He could wrap himself up in the wonderful Agnieszka, in her apricot body. She was like water, she could always elude him if she wanted. He would never be able to catch up with her, to seize her and hold her.

Whenever she stopped and flowed over him it was a miracle, and he drank her in until he was choking.

He never compared her with anyone – that was impossible – but sometimes, when he fell fast asleep, and then woke suddenly, he thought he was lying beside his wife. In panic he sought her name, which he had clean forgotten, and to his relief he would find he was with Agni, and once again he couldn't help wondering at her ephemeral quality. His wife was like a solid, clay amphora. In their love-making he had to turn her and position her, he had to manipulate her. Her skinny body gave him the sort of pleasure that somewhere at base was always painful and mechanical. He hadn't realized until now; he thought it had to be like that, before he knew Agni.

Agni was a miracle.

He wanted to keep her, if he only could. He went on touching her when they were sleeping. Whenever they sat at the table, he would stroke her hand with his index finger over and over again, as if telling her, stay here, don't move. He liked to listen to her doing something in the awful little kitchenette – he could hear the clatter of glass, the clink of the teapot, and her footsteps. He liked to have these sounds around him, because they were like a support wall holding him up, like a safe border for the world, but she didn't make enough of this safe, everyday noise. She was small and light, and her bare feet moved across the wooden floor without a sound. Shout, he said to her as they made love, shout.

As soon as his wife came back from the hospital, Agni stopped appearing. He was frantic. He slipped out of the house and roamed about the town, but never dared ask people questions. He thought something must have happened to her, that she had problems, or that maybe she'd had an accident. Every day he read the local paper, but there was nothing there about Agni. For

hours he sat in the restaurant, right by the front window, drinking vodka after vodka and staring at all the young girls. Once he even thought he'd seen her – he ran outside, but he was too drunk to decide what to do next. At home, he wept in the bathroom. He kept the rented flat for another year and left cards on the door for her, but they just went yellow in the sunlight and the writing faded. He thought he would never survive, that he'd die from the inside, and that this was the end. His entire world would die, including his wife, that sad shadow of a human being – even time would die.

'I know I've become a crabby old shrew,' said his wife, 'but that's because I couldn't have children.' But she knew that wasn't true – it was because she couldn't have had children with him. She imagined she could have had them with Agni, if he had come back, but Agni had disappeared. After returning from hospital she would put on her fur coat and, lying that she was going to the tailor's, she would walk the empty, freezing streets, peering in at people's windows, staring into restaurants and gazing at every male figure. Sometimes in her despair she went out to the suburbs, where the streetlights were no longer on. In the darkness and rain she leaned her brow against a fence or a tree and said Agni, Agni, Agni, as if she had to keep saying that name over and over again, as if she couldn't breathe without it. Agni, Agni, Agni, she said, and then waited, believing that this magic repetition would conquer space, even time too, and would finally bring Agni back. She imagined the name flying from her lips, zooming over the horizon, whizzing along, and landing on Agni's beloved head, tangling in his hair and bringing him here, to her. Sometimes people out late walked past her; they must have thought she was drunk and raving. Occasionally someone accosted her, so she hid her face in her collar – but eventually everyone knew her by sight. She was the woman who had laid

herself open to ridicule for love of a vagabond boy; a young man who hadn't had his hair cut for a year; she had laid herself open to ridicule for love. She was absurd – all because she was possessed by an emotion that only makes sense from deep inside, that people fail to understand, and because she aroused a mixture of astonishment and sympathy. But she was coming to terms with her own absurd behaviour – placing advertisements in the newspaper, accosting people in the street, tugging at their sleeve and asking, 'Have you seen . . .' She stood about at bus stops in front of schools, and even begged a gloomy-looking policeman to check those secret files they have on everyone. She was constantly visiting mortuaries; she even parted couples kissing in the park and always had to apologize for her mistake. At home she would smear her breast and belly in baby oil and touch herself tenderly, while trying to pretend that it was Agni touching her. She would weep in the kitchen while washing up, slicing bread, or listening to the banal words of a pop song for simpletons: 'Then suddenly you went away, a leaf fell at my feet, borne on a breath of wind.'

She slept, and when she awoke she thought about how to kill herself. In the tunnels of her sorrow she considered all the options, from throwing herself under a train to gassing herself in the oven, but she never even attempted it. Once a bunch of knives that she was cleaning and putting away in the drawer fell from her hand. She squatted down to inspect their blades, which lay criss-crossed on the floor. If every single thing, even the very smallest, is part of something larger, and if the larger things are all part of some huge and powerful process, then each tiny thing must be in some way significant to the whole. So what do the crossed blades of kitchen knives lying on the flagstones mean? And why did they cross – why didn't they fall far apart, in gentle parallel lines at a soothing distance from one another?

From then on, each day she threw a bunch of knives to the ground and thought up a divination. The blades always tended towards one another; in their mysterious world they either wanted to huddle together or fight each other, as if there were no other solution.

After a time her sick leave ended, and she went back to work at the pharmacy, where she spent every free moment gazing at the shelves holding the poisons. A few years later she retired and went back to looking at magazines all day; she ordered steel-grey suits from the tailor's, all much the same, like a uniform.

How does the world look when your life is filled with longing? It looks artificial, it crumbles and falls apart in your hands. Every single movement, every thought is watching itself, each emotion starts but never finishes, and finally even the object of your longing becomes artificial and unreal. Only the longing is real, imposing conditions on you – that you must be somewhere else, that you must have something you don't possess, or touch someone who doesn't exist. This state of being is self-contradictory – it is the quintessence of life, and at the same time it is opposed to life. It sinks through the skin into the muscles and bones, which have a painful existence from then on. It's not that they hurt, but that the basis of their existence is pain. And there is no escape from such longing. You would have to escape from your own body, from yourself even – by getting drunk perhaps? Or by sleeping for weeks on end? By losing yourself in your work to a point of frenzy? Or by praying incessantly?

They both did all these things, but separately. To the outside world they looked like normal people, with lives like anyone else's, but then maybe that's how everyone lives. The years change everything, except for that sense of longing. People's hair falls out, papers go yellow, new houses are built on the edge of town, regimes change, the rich become poor and the poor

rich, lonely old ladies next door die, and children's shoes become too small.

They were such very different people now that they might as well have changed their names – they could have filled in a form, saying: 'We're no longer the people we used to be, so we're applying to change our personal details,' or something of the kind. What's the point of population censuses, if people keep changing and turning into someone else? Why does an adult bear the same first name as when he was a child? Why does a once loved woman still have her husband's surname when he's betrayed and abandoned her? Why do men go on bearing the same name when they come back from war, or why does a boy beaten by his father keep the same idiotic name when he starts to beat his own children?

From the outside it looked as if nothing had changed, either between them or beyond them, as if the world were asleep, only giving the occasional shudder because of a passing nightmare. For some time they were still afraid of the telephone ringing too early in the morning or too late in the evening, and of letters brought by postmen who changed as often as the weather. Somewhere at the edge of consciousness they thought Agni would suddenly make contact, without warning, like a peal of thunder. Time doesn't dare to disturb images as sacred as Agni's

'So what happened to them?' asked R. just before the lunar eclipse.

They never said 'I love you' to each other again, because love had become a hidden weakness. They never said much to each other about anything except the shopping, and to exchange Christmas greetings. They came home late from work, then he went to play bridge while she went to church; they did occasionally still huddle up to each other at night, not out of affection, but for warmth, because the house was old and hard to heat. A new

phrase had crept into their speech, and they said it whenever any sort of problem came along – 'Let's stick together,' they told each other over and over, until it sounded like an incantation.

The eclipse

The end of September was a season of psychedelic impressions, thanks to transparent mists in the mornings and elongated shadows in the evenings. The cannabis we sowed in May was mature now, but we had missed the best moment and the male grass had already scattered its pollen about the plot and got the female grass pregnant. Now we had to nip the seeds off the dried heads with tweezers. All the strength of the grass had gone into those seeds, so we had to smoke it for a long time, whole pipefuls, before we could feel it taking our thoughts apart, breaking them into digressions and shredding them into so many different ideas that their sheer volume is frightening.

We had guests over for the lunar eclipse. Just as in the summer when we watched the full moon rise, the meadow was full of cars. Children were running around, people were chinking glasses, bringing out chairs and scraping them across the terrace. Finally the children were pacified by the computer, luminous and silent as it told them a story.

The moon now rose over Marta's house, which meant it was already autumn. For a while it was hidden by a cloud, but when the cloud drifted away it wasn't the same as before – a rounded shadow was visible on its plate-like face, narrow at first, then getting bigger and bigger. It all happened too quickly – barely one joint had time to go a single round before the moon vanished, leaving a brown hole cut out of the sky, a burned-out circle. An incredulous silence fell, and lasted for at least ten seconds, as

long as the face of the moon was dark. In that short while the stars blazed bright; the sky was full of them. We had never seen them look so brilliant – they seemed to be arranged in proper figures, forming numbers, geometric shapes, and even road signs. You could read them as you wished. You could see comic-strip stories in them, Prometheus rescuing Andromeda, Berenice's hair waving in the wind, the Lyre gliding through space, jangling with longing for human fingers. You could see it as a piece of text written in Braille, as row upon row of binary code, or as a computer screen with ambiguous icons. If only we had a huge mouse, a super-mouse, to click on one of those icons, then other skies would open up, fascinating us like a children's computer game. Then we could play them, they would draw us in and deprive us of sleep. In these skies we'd be other people, and we'd have both incredible and quite ordinary adventures. As in a game, we'd die hundreds of times and still have new lives in reserve, maps of our rambling journeys between darkness and light hung out in time and space.

Then the moon flared up again. At first just a shining scrap appeared, a celestial nail-clipping. We clinked glasses and the joint was passed round again. We started to clap.

I walked across the wet grass to Marta's house. She was squatting in front of the stove laying the fire. That cockerel of hers was tripping about at her side, unaware of his approaching death. He looked at me suspiciously with his purple eye. He was like a strange, silent person dressed in feathers.

'Aren't you asleep yet?' I asked.

'If you sleep all winter you've had enough sleep,' she said, or at least, as often happens with Marta, I thought that was what I heard.

She began to cut bread, several slices, half the loaf. I realized that she had got fatter since spring. She buttered the bread, salted it and handed me a slice. Suddenly I felt so hungry that I

could have eaten all night without tasting a thing; that terrible hunger you feel after smoking grass can only be fully satisfied by sleep.

'There's something strange about you,' said Marta suddenly and stood up. 'Go to bed.'

'No. Show me your cellar.'

'It's just the same as yours.'

'Never mind. I want to see it.'

I thought she would refuse, that she'd start making excuses or change the subject. But she took the torch I gave her from its shelf, and opened the door to the cellar.

It was similar to ours – uneven stone steps lightly coated in a glistening layer of damp, with a large flat stone at the bottom that acted as a threshold. Beyond that there was packed-down earth, clay, softer than the stones, warmer. Above our heads hung a low, semicircular roof, so anyone taller would have had to stoop. The walls were made of red blocks of stone, neatly set on top of each other, the bones of the house. Marta shone her torch on the opposite wall, where I saw a tiny window stuffed with straw. Beneath it stood an open wooden box the length of a person, standing on four stones off the ground. Marta had lined it with straw mattresses and sheepskins, probably from farmer Bobol. A neat pile of bedspreads, coverlets and blankets lay at its foot. The torchlight moved into the corner, revealing a heap of potatoes.

'Potatoes for the spring,' she said.

People usually talk about 'potatoes for the winter', but Marta said 'for the spring'.

That night I dreamed Marta had the buds of membranous wings on her shoulders. She pulled down her blouse and showed them to me. They were small, still under the skin, and crumpled like butterfly wings; they were throbbing gently. 'So

that's it,' I said, because I was convinced these wings explained everything.

This dream came back to me when we went to the second-hand shop in Nowa Ruda together, where Marta tried on a cardigan, exactly like the one she already has – grey with buttons up the front and loose buttonholes. She was standing in front of the mirror, and as I was trying to straighten something I touched her shoulder. It was this touch that reawakened my dream – the whole dream lay hidden in a single touch, and went rippling through me. Marta drew in her already sunken cheeks and minced about in front of the mirror; she seemed girlish somehow, like a teenager. I stared at the gentle curve of her shoulders.

I felt moved, as if I had discovered a great secret, as if brushing my fingers against Marta's grey cardigan had caused some alien light to pass through me, sharp and ruthless as a laser beam. I hung the cardigan back in its place ('What do I need another cardigan for? I think I've already had all the cardigans in the world,' said Marta, smiling), then helped her to get in the front and do up her seatbelt.

We drove zigzagging up the mountainside, through damp villages and sunny patches of waste ground full of those tall, aromatic plants that the locals call 'cosmic dill'. Their huge leaves stirred in the wind like wings.

'They're the only plants that fly south for the winter,' said Marta and laughed out loud.

Marta's awakening

Now I think I know where Marta came from and why she is never part of our lives in the winter, but first appeared in early

spring, when we had just arrived and were turning the key in the damp-rusted lock.

She might have woken up in March. At first she lay without moving and wasn't even sure if her eyes were open – in any case, she was in total darkness. And she didn't try to move, because she knew that only her mind was awake, while her body was still sleeping; one careless moment would be enough to slip back into torpor again, into those winding labyrinths of sensations just as real as the feeling of lying here in the dark, more real even, infinitely more real, colourful and sensory. But somehow Marta knew that she had woken up, and that she was somewhere different than before.

First she was aware of the smell of the cellar – safe and damp, the smell of mushrooms and wet hay, a smell that reminded her of summer.

Her body took a long time to come back from sleep, until finally she discovered that her eyes were open, because the darkness was becoming discernible in varying shades and degrees of intensity. She let her gaze go sliding across that wealth of blackness, back and forth, up and down. Only much, much later, by looking at a patch that was growing brighter, did she perceive that there was daylight outside. It was shining through chinks in the straw that plugged up the cellar window. This light went out and appeared again, and it occurred to her that a day must have gone by.

Only then did she feel a chill from somewhere in the distance, from the far ends of her body. She came out to meet it by moving her toes, or at least she thought she was moving them. After a while her feet responded – they were cold. Then gradually she woke up the whole of her body, summoning it back to life as if reading the roll of the dead, and in turn, bit by bit, the parts of her body responded: here, here, here.

Twice she tried to get up, but twice her body eluded her and fell back against the boards; she thought she was sitting up, but she wasn't. The third time she managed to hold her body up, or perhaps to hold on to it as well, and from then on she felt moderately secure. Step by step she reached the door, and spent a long time grappling with the iron handle. Her fingers were as weak as spring potato sprouts. The wet stone steps led her slowly up to the hall, where she saw real light coming through the chinks in the door, and had to shield her eyes.

Frost had corroded the walls of the house, which were now sweating like a sick man. Dust speckled with mouse droppings lay on the floor. She sat down on one of the chairs in the kitchen, which like everything else was thawing out, emanating a chill, so she made an effort to stand up and fetch a heater from a drawer in the sideboard. She pumped up a little water and turned the tap – a muddy, reddish liquid poured out of it, like watered-down blood. She washed her face in it and filled a mug. Soon she had the mug full of boiling water and was warming her hands on it. She drank it sip by sip, like a cure for death, and felt herself slowly beginning to thaw from the inside as her body returned to life.

That day Marta went outside as well. The front door was still damp from the recent frost and, like everything, smelled of mushrooms and water. There were still patches of dirty snow lying about in the garden. The sun was nibbling away at the edges of these decaying snowy omelettes. Soggy, rotting grass, and what had once been nasturtiums, asters and night-scented stocks were sticking out from under them.

Anxiously she looked up at the sky – it was wreathed in low, scudding clouds, through which the sun was shining over the forest. As every year, Marta was amazed that the sun could have moved so far round and was now casting long shadows that

provided a refuge for the snow. She went back into the hall and put on her gumboots, which were cold and damp, then set off behind the house, across the garden and the damage done to it by the winter and the darkness. She leaned over the cabbage heads that had been so solid and handsome in the autumn, but were now slimy, rotten little heaps. There was nothing left of the sunflowers, though that summer, as usual, they looked as if nothing could possibly overpower their mighty stalks and leonine heads, their faces darkened by the sun. The fence they grew against was leaning, soaked in the ubiquitous water. Then she took a look at her orchard full of old apple and plum trees. A huge branch had broken off the sweetest cherry tree. The lush orchard, rich in tall grass and large cushions of greenery, as she remembered it, was no longer there. Now it reminded her of a graveyard. The bare trees looked like crosses, and the sheaves of flattened grass like graves. Marta hated the damp as much as the winter and the darkness. The water was dishonest. She felt that she could stand up to it, but only when it was being itself and wasn't pretending to be something else. When it was flowing down the stream you could cup it in your hands and bring it to your face, but most of the time water made itself invisible by infiltrating the plants and other objects. Then it would sink in, coating them in a layer of frost and killing them, or else it hung in the clouds like an eternal punishment for your sins.

Marta went back inside because the cold had returned to her body. She stood on the steps for a while to see the rest of the valley.

The mountains looked monotonous – olive green and black, they were the colour of water too. Wherever the ground was cooler the snow was still lying. Out of all four chimneys only Whatsisname's was smoking. In front of the house where the Frosts used to live there was a blue car, and two people were

chatting on the wooden terrace. Marta shivered, went back into the kitchen and set about lighting the stove.

Tidying up the attic

Now that it's autumn, I spent all day tidying up the attic. I was putting summer things away in boxes, with mothballs between the layers of clothes, and newspaper stuffed into the shoes, which I packed in paper bags. It turned out that I hadn't worn many of the dresses at all – there had been no occasion to. They were hanging in the wardrobe, but they had still aged through the months of June, July and August. I could see that they were wearing out, going at the seams, softening and getting older all by themselves without my input. And there was a sort of beauty in it, the opposite of ripening, a beauty that appears without anyone's help. Sandal leather goes black, softens and stretches, straps wear thin, buckles rust, the colour of a favourite blouse fades, or the sleeves of a shirt fray at the cuffs. I've seen what happens to paper with time – it goes stiff and yellow, it seems to go dry and age in a completely human way. I've seen how ball-point pens start running out and pencils get shorter, until one day to our amazement we find that a small stump is all that's left of that fine long pencil of a year ago. I've seen how glass loses its lustre, like the cloudy wardrobe mirror that was so dazzling for years on end.

For some reason people have developed a liking for only one sort of transformation. They are fond of increase and development, but not decrease and disintegration. They prefer ripening to decay. They like things to be younger and younger, more and more juicy, fresh and unripe; they like things that are not yet fully moulded, still a bit angular, driven by a powerful spring of

potential, always the moment before, never after. They like young women, new houses with fresh plaster, new books smelling of printer's ink, and new cars that are really just variations on a familiar theme for those in the know. They like the latest technology, the gleam of freshly polished metal, newly bought objects brought home in fancy packaging, the rustle of smooth cellophane, the tension of virgin string. They like brand new banknotes – even if they don't fit in their wallets, clean plastic surfaces that won't go yellow for years, polished tabletops without the slightest trace of a mark, empty spaces yet to be cultivated, smooth cheeks, the expression 'anything can happen' (who bothers to add the words 'in vain'?), green peas forced from their pods, astrakhan fur, flowers in bud, innocent puppies, baby goats, newly cut planks that haven't yet forgotten the shape of the tree, and bright green grass oblivious of corn spikes. People like what's new and has never existed before. The new! The new!

Nowa Ruda

Nowa Ruda is a town full of hairdressers, second-hand clothes shops and men whose eyelids are coated in coal dust. It's a town built in valleys, on slopes and hilltops, a town of small bridges slung casually across a little river that appears and disappears, always a different, more fashionable colour. It's a town full of statues of Saint John, adulterated perfumes, self-service cafés, shoddy goods painstakingly arranged in shop windows; a town of damp patches on the walls of houses, windows from which only the feet of passers-by are visible, and labyrinthine courtyards; an end-of-the-road town, a place where you change trains on a journey; a town of stray dogs, secret passageways, blind

alleys and mysterious symbols above the front doors of houses; a town of red brick buildings, elliptical roundabouts, crooked crossroads, bypasses leading to the centre, marketplaces on the outskirts, steps that start and finish on the same level, sharp turns that straighten roads, and forks where the left branch leads right and the right branch left. It's the town with the shortest summer, where the snow never melts entirely; a town of evenings that set in abruptly from behind the mountains and land on the houses like a monstrous butterfly net; a town of watery ice cream, little shops that sell cows' bones, lady clerical workers with garish make-up, and drunken mothers with babies in prams. It's a town dreaming that it's in the Pyrenees, that the sun never sets on it, that all the people who've left will be back one day, and that there are underground tunnels from the German era leading to Prague, Wrocław and Dresden. It's a fragment town, a Silesian, Prussian, Czech, Austro-Hungarian and Polish town, a town on the outskirts. It's a town full of people who all think of each other by their first names, but address each other as 'Sir' and 'Madam'; a town of desolate Saturdays and Sundays, where time drifts by, news is late and names are got wrong. Despite its name, derived from the German *Neurode*, there's nothing new in it, and if something new were to appear it would immediately be coated in filth, it would go black and sit mouldering on the edge of existence.

The founder

The founder of Nowa Ruda was Tüntzel, whose profession was knife-making, so he was known as Messerschmied. He made knives for killing, cutting hair, tanning hides, chopping cabbage, cutting straps out of leather, marking trees to be felled,

and even for carving figures and decorations out of wood. It was a good profession, and everyone respected Tüntzel Messerschmied. But in the settlement where he lived there was another knife-maker with the same skills as him. As Tüntzel was the younger, he bought a horse and packed all his possessions on a cart, including his tools, his whetstone, clothes chests, a few pots, skins and woollen blankets, and his heavily pregnant wife.

On the other side of the mountains lay fertile valleys and rich forests full of spruce trees so tall that they scratched the surface of the sky. These forests were teeming with villages, some of which would be sure to need a knife-maker, so Tüntzel aimed straight for the midday sun. For several days they wandered along forest paths, until they stopped by a stream where Tüntzel's wife began to give birth. With his best knife Tüntzel cut the child's umbilical cord, but at daybreak his wife died without a word, and the child died immediately after. Tüntzel kicked the tree trunks in despair and screamed in rage and misery. Why did I set off like a fool? he thought, why did I go barging off into an alien world? Where am I to bury my wife now? In the forest like an animal? The horse gazed at him, hanging its head forlornly. Tüntzel's cries brought some woodcutters who were felling trees nearby, and they helped him to bury his wife and child.

Tüntzel insisted on staying at their graveside. He built himself a wooden shelter and sat waiting for an angel to come and tell him what to do next. Meanwhile, every few days the woodcutters came to see him. They brought him things to eat and marvelled at his knives. He swapped them a knife for an axe and cut down the trees around his cottage, used the horse to pull the roots out of the ground, and enclosed the field he'd made with a wooden fence. At night he could hear packs of wolves howling

as they crossed the mountains, but he wasn't afraid. Before winter set in he made a trip to his old settlement and visited his family. Among other things, he told them he needed a dog and a new wife. But the first winter he survived alone, though it cost him a great deal. He spent the whole time chopping wood to save himself from freezing, and he set snares for skinny hares and deer. In spring his relatives brought him what he had asked for. The woman was called Dorota; she was small, thin and reticent. Tüntzel was afraid he would never come to love her, but in time they did become close. Meanwhile the dog grew up to be a wonderful companion. He was fast and strong, and could hunt by himself; Tüntzel felt entirely safe when he went into the forest with that dog at his side.

Look how it all starts from one single man. Each year Tuntzel and Dorota had a child, so with the help of the woodcutters he built a new cottage. He and his wife turned the whole hillside into fertile fields, and sowed buckwheat and oats by the stream. The woodcutters built their own cottages nearby, and brought women to live in them. When Tüntzel was old, the valley had turned into a small settlement, which they called 'Neurode', meaning 'new clearing'.

One day, Tüntzel had a strange experience. In a freshly cut clearing on the other side of the stream he saw a single tree that the axes must have forgotten. Intrigued, he went closer and took a good look. It was a spruce, a fine one, tall and straight, the sort that are used to build houses. He walked around it and noticed an object embedded in the bark; it looked as if it were made of iron, and it shone like a burnished blade. First he prodded it, then tried to prise it up with a fingernail, then with a stick, and finally with one of his knives, but to no avail. The solid body of the tree had a firm grip on the object, as if the metal and the tree had grown into each other, so there was no

way of separating them. Tüntzel decided that at last this was a sign – even if no angel had actually come and pointed out the spot with a blazing finger, now he knew where to build the church. He went to fetch his neighbours and together they felled the great spruce. That night Tüntzel finally succeeded in extracting the mysterious object from the tree. It was a knife, but not like the ones he made – it was different. Its blade was incomparably smoother, almost as smooth as a mirror – it reflected the night sky. A tiny string of symbols carved into it, however, meant nothing to Tüntzel, who knew no patterns apart from the tracks of wolves and hares and the fascinating shapes of snowflakes. But it wasn't the tree that was important, or even the knife, but the spot it had identified. So they marked out a rectangle on the ground and agreed unanimously to build their church there.

A very long time after, when he was already so old that he got everything confused, Tüntzel wondered if that tree really had been growing there, or if perhaps he had seen a tree like that with a knife forced into it when he was a little boy, somewhere else entirely, and had then dreamed about it, because he always had vivid dreams, as brilliant as a knife blade. He asked to be buried with the knife he had discovered; unlike Tüntzel, its steel blade had not aged at all. Before he died a kind-hearted literate person read out to him the tiny row of symbols written there, which formed the word SOLINGEN. This name meant nothing to anyone.

Many centuries later a teacher at the Nowa Ruda secondary school presented a written proposal to the Town Council for a monument to the Founder to be erected, but as this entire story, like a good part of the history of the town, is recorded in German rather than Polish, the petition was ignored and it all came to nothing.

The Salvation Machine

The Cutlers had only one cosmological image, that of the Salvation Machine. They used to draw it on the walls of their houses and carve it on knife handles, and their infrequent children learned about it from the tales told by the adults and drew pictures of it in the sand with sticks. It featured in the mournful psalms they sang, which were so peculiar and sorrowful that they alone could bear to listen.

The cosmic tool for salvation is rotary motion: both the largest kind that turns distant stars on their orbits and keeps the zodiac and the entire universe in motion, and also the small kind that activates man-made objects such as mill wheels, crankshafts, clocks and cartwheels, and helps to grind poppy seeds and make clay pots. It also includes rotary motion on the very smallest scale, oscillating within all the tiniest particles that make up the world.

I would describe it as follows: the sun, set in rotary motion at the beginning of time, is like a gigantic vacuum cleaner – it sucks light from matter and passes it on to the orbits of planets and the vast waterwheels of the zodiac. Their motion passes the light on further, to the edges of the entire world, from where its light originates.

Light lives in the souls of people and animals, hiding there, in hibernation, as if shut in a box; the moon, meanwhile, is a transport ship – it carries the souls of the dead from the earth to the sun. In the first half of each month it gathers them up, getting brighter and brighter, waxing until it is full. In the second half of the month it delivers them to the sun, so when the new moon starts it has unloaded its cargo and is empty again. Then it sits between earth and sun like a silvery tanker, void and ready for its next task.

The sun will go on and on, say the Cutlers' psalms, until it has sucked up all the particles of light and delivered them to the Owner. Then it will come to an end, go dark and disintegrate, and with it the moon, and then the harmonies of the zodiac will shatter into pieces. The whole great, elaborate cosmic machine will screech to a halt and finally come crashing down. The galaxies won't be needed any more, and the outer edges of the world will end up at its centre.

We're going, I said, tomorrow is All Saints' Day

Marta was sitting at the table rubbing her reddened eyes. Her entire kitchen was incredibly clean; all the pots had been put away, the oilcloth scrubbed, and the wooden floor polished to a shine. She had even washed the windows and swept away all the cobwebs that caught the sun in summer. The stone window-sills looked sepulchral without the remains of a single dead moth. I had brought her some leftover cake, which she devoured. Then she got up and shuffled off to the other room; through the open door I could see her immaculately made bed, all ready for the winter.

She brought out a wig, dark, almost black, made of finely braided hair, exactly as I wanted. I put it on, and Marta smiled. She had crumbs of poppy-seed cake on her lips.

'Wonderful,' she said, and showed me the mirror.

I loomed out of it fuzzy and alien, with a dark face – I didn't recognize myself.

I plan to wear the wig instead of a cap. I'll put it on as soon as I wake up, so I can get through the chilly rooms and reach the bathroom unharmed. I might even sleep in it. I'll do my work and plan the summer repairs in it, and I'll go out in it.

I went over to Marta and hugged her. She came up to my chin; she felt as fragile and delicate as a parasol mushroom and her short, white hair smelled of damp.

In the afternoon I went to say goodbye to her and to remind her to light an All Saints' Day candle for us, in memory of the Frosts' child.

I went into her house, but it was empty. On the table lay a threaded needle and that large pewter plate, the most touchable thing in Marta's house. I sat down and waited for her, for about an hour or two. I ran my finger along the elaborate metal pattern on the plate. There were no flies buzzing and no flames crackling beneath the hotplate. It was so quiet that I could hear my own breathing.

I knew about the cellar door – it was behind me. It was shut, but the padlocks were hanging open in the staple. I could have stood up, opened the door and gone downstairs. I could have lain down beside her in the darkness and damp, among the piles of potatoes waiting for spring. That's what I was thinking, but it's hard to think about anything properly in Marta's house; it's like a sponge that absorbs a thought before it has a chance to emerge.

Then I realized dusk had fallen; I hadn't even noticed it growing dark. I would have gone on sitting there, hypnotizing myself with my own breathing, and I would never have awoken if it weren't for that old pewter plate, which was shining with a powerful, chilly glow, filling the whole kitchen, illuminating my hands and casting shadows on to things. It was reflecting all the past and future full moons, all the bright, starry skies, all the candle flames and lamps, and the cold stream of all sorts of fluorescent lights.

Divination from the sky

R.'s been telling me how when he was little he used to read the clouds – at least that's how he remembers it.

As he saw them, the clouds formed into clear patterns – the shapes of animals, battleships and sailboats, flocks of white sheep herded from below by a darker, swifter sheepdog, cars, even fire engines, or monsters – snakes, dragons, huge chasm-like jaws on short legs, and winged, ethereal skeletons. Once he had started school he began to see letters and symbols too. Sometimes arithmetical problems were solved right before his eyes – a washed-out Two would add itself to a pot-bellied Three, and finally the wind would blow along a snaky shape that was a Five. In time, more complex mathematical equations appeared. When he was in the second year at school, this was how he learned his multiplication tables. From his window, which looked out on to the railway tracks, he could see a bit of sky. On one side the clouds were always slightly reddish or orange, because they were lit up by the flames from the coking plant. On that vast blackboard he saw a whole skyful of algebra. He had a particularly strong memory of Seven times Eight, because that was the worst sum and the hardest to learn. Seven reminded him of a bent croissant, and Eight of two little round clouds joined together. After them came the result – a Five, in the form of a slightly blurred hook, and an amazingly sharp Six, the coiled exhaust fumes of a jet plane, perhaps. For hours he'd sit at the window and gaze at the sky. In the seventh year, when he first fell in love, he saw hearts and four-leafed clovers. Later in life he used to see other signs – a peace symbol the size of half the sky, slowly making its way across the city from west to east, and a huge Tao symbol that he noticed over the castle at Bolków while on a student outing. Finally the time

came to be occupied with more important things than staring at the sky.

Lately R. has realized that right now, between the ages of thirty and forty, is the best time in life for seeing this sort of thing, so recently he bought a tripod from the Ukrainians at the market, and as soon as spring comes he'll set up a camera on the east-facing terrace. He'll aim the lens up at the sky, above the crowns of the twin spruce trees, and leave it there until autumn. Each day he'll take one photograph, even when the sky is shrouded in uniform grey. R. is certain that in autumn we'll have a set of stills showing a rational sequence of skies, which is sure to mean something. It'll be possible to put all the pictures together like a jigsaw puzzle, or to load them one on top of another in the computer, or to make one single sky out of them with the help of a software programme. And then we'll know.